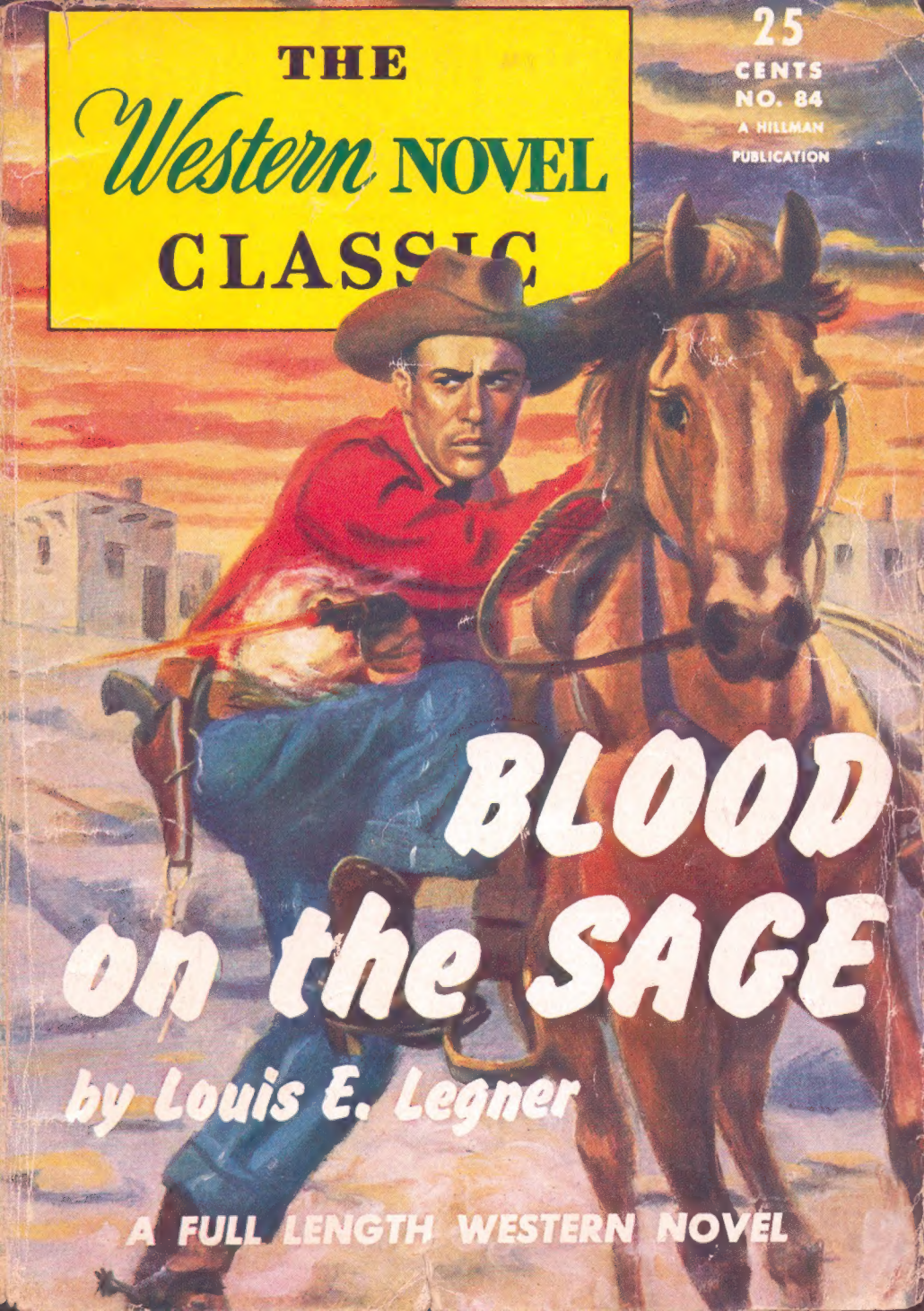
THE
Western NOVEL
CLASSIC
25
CENTS
NO. 84
A HILLMAN
PUBLICATION
BLOOD
on the SAGE
by Louis E. Legner
A FULL LENGTH WESTERN NOVEL

ABOUT THIS WESTERN NOVEL CLASSIC

BLOOD ON THE SAGE

By LOUIS E. LEGNER In the Santa Inez Valley Shade Sloan deals out death and destruction with a ruthless hand. Aroused by the murder of his partner and the annihilation of their ranch at the hands of Sloan, Blaze Brill gathers a force to fight the outlaw and his pack of bad men.

Aided by a trail-wise Mexican and a U. S. Deputy Marshal whom Shade has dishonored, Blaze and his band pursue Sloan to his hideout and, fighting against great odds, avenge themselves for their losses.

Louis E. Legner has written a rapid-fire tale, peopled with true characters of the romantic Southwest — desperate outlaws and vengeful cowpunchers. And, looming above them all, gallant Blaze Brill and Margaret Stark, for whose love blood was spilled on the sage.

An exciting, realistic WESTERN NOVEL CLASSIC, certain to entertain.

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BLOOD ON THE SAGE

BY LOUIS E. LEGNER

Novel Selections Inc. New York

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This Western Novel Classic represents an abridgement of the original to speed the action.

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Chapter 1

At the head of his pack of killers, "Shade" Sloan invaded the tiny "B-H spread." He stormed up to within a hundred yards of the doll house which passed for ranch headquarters and, with his men spread one horse-length behind him like the huge paws of a living pincher, waited.

The cloud of dust which had attended his coming swirled on ahead, pushed by a passing breeze, wrapped its grey arms tightly around the ranch house once, and was gone.

Nothing moved.

The odor of horses and the rancid smell of sweated, unwashed men rose above the clean aroma of the Arizona sage.

The man on Shade's right spoke, his tone lowpitched.

"A Sharp's Special is stickin' outta that window, aimed at you!"

"I know it!"

Shade's lips twisted. Settled to grimmer lines.

A man on each flank swung his horse about to face the rear and, again, nothing moved.

Then the ranch door opened and a man came out to walk directly toward the leader of the pack.

Shade tensed slightly.

Two long-snouted Remington "five-guns" were thonged low on that man's snugly fitting blue denim pants and nothing from the tops of his open holsters to his lean waist line was loose enough to trip up a fast draw. Also, he wore flat-heeled house slippers. No cowboy boots could teeter his tall body and throw him off balance when, and if, action was required.

Shade eyed him inch by further inch. There was power in the ample spread of his chest, courage in the set of his lips, fixed purpose along the ridges of his jaw and all of these qualities in his unwavering eyes, which were blue—the blue of wintry skies over Arizona.

"I reckon." began Shade, "yuh must be this here 'Blaze' Brill?"

"What if I am?"

"Hope yuh ain't aimin' tuh stay around here long."

"Sure do." was Blaze's curt reply. "Hope it don't aggravate you none."

"Which it does! Suppose yuh push yore spread west across the Dos Amigos mountains—"

"Suppose you go kiss a pig!" snapped Blaze. "This is free country and we like it here."

"We?"

"Me and my pard, Pat Hurley—the one inside coverin' you with a Sharp's Special."

"Tuh Hell with him—an' you! I'm set fer anything—get that? Anything!"

A tiny smile twiched Blaze's grim lips.

"Yeah? What're those two rannies on both ends so nervous about? Tell 'em to turn around, there's only me'n Pat runnin' this spread. Anyhow it isn't polite to turn your backs when you're visitin'."

"Damn yuh!" raged Shade, suddenly aware of insolence. "This ain't no joke, fellah! I done invited yuh tuh move yore spread—this time I'm orderin' yuh! Move it *pronto,* hombre, or I won't leave yuh *nothin' tuh move!* Includin' you—an' yore pard!"

"You," said Blaze plainly, "can go to Hell!"

"I'm a plumb forgivin' man," stated Shade grimly, "so I overlooks yore harsh words—this time. Mebbe you don't know who I am—"

"I ain't hankerin' for any introduction. But I know!"

"An' yuh ain't runnin'?"

"No!"

Beneath the tanned skin of Shade Sloan's hard face the surging red blood receded. A horrid grey took its place and now a long-forgotten scar stood out like a smudge of ink. Some bullet had done that, years ago, and Shade Sloan was about to invite, in his rage, another. His eyes, usually blank slate were glittering and, as they slanted briefly toward the ranch window, they were no less brilliant than the Arizona sunlight flicking off a steady rifle barrel.

Among the pack of killers there was a stir and tightening.

One move, one word from Shade would have called violent death to the scene. But he delayed it.

"I'll get you later!" he gritted through clenched teeth. "An' that don't mean I'm quittin', it jest means—*later!*"

"Then call off your pack!" ordered Blaze. "That's sensible."

"Yeah," agreed Shade slowly. "But it shore runs agin my grain." He turned his horse reluctantly. "Git goin', hombre!"

Until he had watched Shade Sloan's wolves to a safe distance away Blaze Brill's hands remained steady. But, when he faced his tense partner inside their headquarters, they were trembling a bit.

"Whew!" he whistled softly, "that was close!"

"An' a Hell of a lot closer for Shade!" exploded Pat Hurley. "I kept my sights notched on his big belly until my eyes was waterin' an' I got a cramp in my trigger finger. Gawd! I jest stopped in time!"

Blaze turned serious eyes to him.

"Maybe you didn't, Pat."

"Are yuh plumb *loco,* yuh damn fool? If I'd ha' plugged Shade his outfit would'a got *you!*"

"They sure would—but then they wouldn't have any leader. And without a lobo like him runnin' loose, the whole of Santa Inez valley

would be safe. Before Shade Sloan dies there'll be plenty blood on the sage."

"Mebbe so," agreed Pat. "But I'm only interested in seein' that none uh mine runs out." He stared at the four grimy walls of their little ranch house. "Hell, Blaze, this shack ain't fit tuh pen sheep, but us two built it with our own lily white hands. We ain't givin' it up tuh Shade until it ain't here no more—or we ain't!"

Many miles to the north, in a ranch headquarters that was almost palatial, Shade Sloan lay sprawled in a great arm chair and stared into the fireplace.

Not far away stood his lieutenant, Tucson Tom, twisting a cigarette mechanically the while his sharp black eyes keenly studied his chief.

Tall, gaunt, hook-nosed, his naturally dark skin etched by the red fire-light, he seemed at that moment to have more than the quarter-blood of Apache Indian to which he admitted. He thumbed a match into flame and, with cigarette alight, thumbed again at the watching men who lounged around. Obediently, they moved to the door.

Only when the last man had disappeared into the darkness outside did Tucson Tom glide to the fireplace, there to flip his glowing butt in an arc across Shade's line of sight. His chief looked up sharply.

"What's eatin' yuh, Tom?"

"Shade, I been yore *segundo* a long time an' I kin almost read yore mind. This time yuh ain't thinkin straight."

"Meanin' that Brill hombre we met this morin'? Hell, we done wiped out little spreads like that afore this."

"Shore we did," Tucson hesitated. "Couldn't they be bought out, with no hard feelin's?"

"Hell! You know that ain't my style."

"I looked that Blaze Brill over right careful this mornin'," continued Tuscon steadily, "an' I'd a heap rather have his guns pointin' *away* from me. I never seen his pard, but he's most likely a curly wolf, too. Them two won't die easy."

"Tom, yuh don't scare that easy," praised Shade. "What else yuh got on yore mind?"

"The Law done come in an'—"

"I'm runnin' it!" snarled Shade. "Ain't I?"

"In San Luis County—yeah!" stressed Tucson. "Yuh can easy elect them bums. But yuh can't elect no Gov'mint Marshals. An' yuh can't buy the one that's here, either, not nohow!"

"You quit worryin' about that damned Charley Burwash—"

"Not until yuh give me a Hell of a good reason not to!"

"Damn yuh, Tom—"

"You listen tuh me, Shade," cut in his lieutenant decisively. "I know what's eatin' yuh. Once you was King from the Sierra Verdes to the

Dos Amigos, an' from Hell-an-gone north clear down into Mexico. Yuh run it high an' mighty an' now yore aimin' tuh do it again!"

"What's wrong with that?"

"In them days yuh had me an' every Apache warrior in south Arizona doin' yore dirty work, raidin', killin', burnin' an' pilin' gold into yore sack. We done a good job fer yuh—too damn good! When things got too hot, yuh blamed the thievin' Apaches but we didn't care two whoops in Hell so long as yuh split the loot fair. Gawd! What a blind bunch uh fools we was!"

"Meanin' what?"

"Meanin' that me'n my gang uh Apaches was runnin' over everything, includin' the toughest whites in this section. We thought nobody could lick us!"

"Nobody in Arizona could—"

"No—not in Arizona!" cut in Tucson viciously. "But we wasn't expectin' the *hull damn United States* tuh light on our necks! We cleaned out the first few soldiers they sent in, cut 'em into little chunks—*massacred 'em!*"

Tucson Tom was all Apache for the moment. His eyes were gleaming like polished ebony, his nose pinched into a cruel beak.

"Forget it, Tom!" jerked Shade tensely.

"Forget it?" snarled Tucson savagely. "My Apache grandmother an' her people is crowded into a Reservation! With soldiers ridin' around an' around—tuh see they don't get out. They won't get out—never! They're scared—an' Apaches don't scare easy! They're scared by somethin' they can't savvy—the Gov'mint. So'm I."

"Talk it outta yore system."

"Look, Shade." Tucson was breathing heavily. "We cleaned out the first bunch—they was jest hombres with guns an' they died jest like other hombres if yuh hit 'em right. But—after them come more— an' more—an' still more! It was like stoppin' a sand storm! General Crook brings in his army an' they don't hafta worry none about grub, water or more bullets when they shot off the last one. Apaches hafta think about that, they gotta live on what their God gives 'em an' He don't bring it in by hundreds uh wagon-loads—from *no place!*"

"No place, Hell!" grunted Sloan. "You know them supplies come from Washington. That's a big city, with plenty grub an' money."

"Mebbe," superstitious doubt colored the husky word. "But the Apaches never seen no city. Even if they did, they wouldn't believe no city would pass out that much grub an' bullets free an' promisc'us. Hell, no! I done told 'em about Gov'mint but they believed that's only a new name for the white man's God— an' a damn sight stronger than theirs!"

"Now I get yore drift, Tom. It leads right back tuh the Dep'ty

Marshal, Charley Burwash. I done told yuh not tuh worry about him an' now I'm givin' yuh a reason. He's leavin' our company!"

"Gawd, Shade! Yuh ain't gunnin' *him* out?" gasped Tucson.

"I ain't plumb loco," assured his chief. "No, he goes out accordin' tuh the Law—only this time the same Law he sticks to so damn noble is kickin' him right in the face!"

"I don't savvy this Law business," muttered Tucson uneasily.

"I do, an' I got me a smart hombre that savvies it a heap better! Charges has already been filed in the Federal Court an' the trial comes up right soon, less'n two weeks."

"It won't work. We both know Charley Burwash is square as they come. Didn't our whole outfit work a couple weeks tryin' tuh lay the deadwood on him? Didn't you use all uh yore tricks tuh snag him intuh jest one shady deal? That hombre is so honest he leans over backwards. Yuh might convict him in San Luis County where yuh own every man, body an' soul, but yuh can't do that in no Federal Court. Yuh got no evidence!"

"But I can make it!" retorted Shade evilly. "That law-shark I hired comes damn high but he's worth it. He made up a couple papers that even Burwash couldn't deny wasn't his writin'. He's got a dozen witnesses ready tuh swear they seen him sign—" ..

Tucson Tom stood up suddenly, his mouth screwed as though he chewed putrid meat. Staring stonily over Shade's head, he snapped:

"Like I said, I don't savvy this Law business. When we started this pow-wow wasn't you thinkin' about givin' me a man's job? Meanin' gunnin' out Blaze Brill an' Pat Hurley?"

"Yeah, I was."

"They'll be starin' at the sky by sundown tomorrow, but they won't be seein' nothin'."

"I don't want it that quick," vetoed his chief. "Whittle 'em down slow, some stock here and there. Then the barns. Next, the shack an'—last—them!"

"How come?" asked Tucson.

"It'll soften up the rest of the valley. I've watched those rannies from New Mexico an' west Texas pourin' their cows over the Sierra Verdes, across all of Santa Inez valley, even climbin' the Dos Amigos to reach the parts of the Alamitos Desert where there's water enough to run stock."

"There's plenty uh them an' they comes from a hard country," agreed Tucson thoughtfully. "But our outfit ain't exactly been raised with tender an' lovin' care."

"No. That's why I ain't gettin' 'em killed off reckless. New men, even if they're top hands, needs my personal trainin' an' I ain't got no extry time right now. We keep 'em close together an' healthy.

"There's another reason," continued Shade. "This country's gettin' too crowded. That new minin' town up north is boomin'—"

"Gold?" cut in Tucson eagerly.

"And silver—tons of high grade ore, but it's going north."

"We cut in?"

Shade nodded.

"Later. They're still comin' in too fast to suit me. I want 'em to settle down, pick a Town Marshal, appoint their Miner's Court an' the rest of it. Then I'll step in an' do my own organizin'. I can't do that while Charley Burwash is still in my way. I'm leavin' tomorrow to settle *him!*"

"Shore," Tucson sighed in gusty relief. "I'll tend tuh everything here. Yuh only want them two took apart, right slow an' careful? But how long before I finish the chore—when do *they* get it?"

"Not before I get back? That might be some weeks—but you don't gun 'em out until I'm there to see it—personal! By that time Charley Burwash'll be outa the way an' I'll be the Law around here. Then all Hell busts loose!"

Chapter 2

It was Pat Hurley's turn to do the home chores but he was lying out in the cold darkness clutching the stock of his rifle. A few hundred feet away stood the warm walls of his little shack, separated from the surrounding blackness only by the bright yellow rectangle of its window. The night had no moon, the stars lent small help to eyesight.

Blaze Brill was long overdue and, as yet, no rumble of hoofs announced his return.

"My Gawd," moaned Pat, "what happened to Blaze?"

He laid his ear to the ground and tensity gripped him. The sound was too far away to distinguish whether caused by one horse or more. If one, Blaze rode it—if more, well, that was why Pat lay outside of his shack in protective darkness.

Minutes later a horseman halted to his challenge.

"That you, Blaze?" Then, "What happened?"

A weary voice responded:

"Between fifty an' sixty of our cows are gone!"

Blaze passed the reins of his dripping, blowing horse to his partner.

"Tend to him, will you, Pat? He went far—but I had to be sure about those cows. I'll be eatin'."

The coffee had boiled away to powerful ebony. Between scalding gulps Blaze sketched the day of dismay.

"They're gone from the north range. Where to, I don't know. Must'a happened two-three days ago. The sign was cold, it gave out quick. I

circled plenty wide. Cut fresh sign—comin' and goin'—horses, no cows. They're gone!"

"Damn!" roared Pat. "We can't stand losin' no more! By Gawd! We gotta ride tomorrow. Mebbe the south range is cleaned, too. Hell!" His voice rose in a blistering crescendo, blaring unprintable words, in typical Irish fashion relieving his white hot rage.

Much before dawn the partners were speeding southward, longing for light. Enough light to recognize cattle—their cattle. Some animal rose with a startled snort and they risked their necks in a reckless race. It was a cow and they threw it, bellowing terror.

"It's ours!" jubilated Pat, his face rosy with hope in the grey gloom. "We ain't lost everything! This much we keep!"

"Sure," agreed Blaze soberly. "But we've got to haze this bunch closer to headquarters—but Hell! There isn't enough water closer—they'll drift right back here. How can we cover that much range—just us two?"

"One of us stays with the cows, night an' day, the other guards our buildin's," declared Pat.

"We've gotta stick together from now on! Whoever jumps us won't be only a couple men—it'll be a dozen! Two of us got a chance—"

"Tuh live an' that's all!" cut in Pat. "Tuh save these cows we gotta have fresh horses an' our *remuda's* at headquarters. We ain't got time tuh build us no new corral down here, nor tuh move our supplies. There ain't no way out—we gotta split."

Blaze nodded reluctantly.

"I'll be headin' back. I'll bring you some extra grub an' two horses. That bay mare an' Pink-eye will likely be satisfied to stay with yuh. So long, old-timer, I'll be seein' you tomorrow."

But it was early afternoon when Pat saw him—a singed, sweated and desperate Blaze. He brought food but no spare horses.

"Our *remuda's* been run off!" he gasped. "Our barns are burned flat! I just came in time to save the shack!"

Inspecting Blaze's staggering horse, Pat's face whitened.

"He can't go on without a long rest an' mine is plenty tired. We got no fresh horses. We're tied down—we gotta stay right here! An' mebbe—while we're sittin' here plumb helpless—Shade Sloan is burnin' the rest uh our outfit!"

"He said we were to move," stated Blaze heavily, "or he wouldn't leave us *nothin'* to move—includin' us!"

At that same time Shade Sloan was grinning approval over the report of Tucson Tom.

"Yuh shore done fine."

"How about you?" countered his lieutenant.

"Man, it was easy!" bragged Sloan. "Charley Burwash must'a been

hard up—he hired hisself a booze-fightin' lawyer that was so rotten even Charley told him tuh high-tail an' he tried the case hisself. But he didn't have no chance. He couldn't explain no forged documents with a dozen witnesses callin' him a liar. My lawyer done the rest. Charley seen what he was up against but he kept fightin' even after the Law kicked him out with a dishonorable discharge. He's headed back here—"

"Hell!" jerked out Tucson.

"Let 'im come," Shade shrugged indifferently. "He ain't Gov'mint no more, jest an ordinary hombre."

"But suppose Gov'mint sends in another Marshal?"

"Not for a long time they won't," was the assurance. "A man from Washington who was 'observin' the case' told me Gov'mint couldn't be bothered no more with a big chunk uh desert—he couldn't even figgur how come they didn't let the Injuns keep it in the beginnin'."

"That shore relieves me a heap," sighed Tucson. "Now, we're all set tuh go. What about Blaze an' Pat—an' the rest?"

"Tonight!" ordered Shade. "Tomorrow we start on the others!"

Tender attention had given back much of its strength to Blaze's exhausted horse. Toward sundown, the animal responded gratefully to another rub-down and seemed nearly normal. After a final examination of its condition Blaze stared northward.

"What do you say, Pat?" he proposed. "Takin' it easy, we can get to the shack, load up what's left of our supplies an' be back here near sunup. We make our stand right here—an' together!"

"Shore," agreed his partner. "I'll ride down a ways tuh see if them cows is ready tuh bed down peaceful fer the night. I'm hungry, rustle us up a good feed."

"Hell, a good feed'll damn near clean up what we got," growled Blaze. "We sure got to make that trip tonight."

When Pat returned the partners ate hurriedly, eager to start while daylight remained and anxious to get back quickly to their cattle.

Because of their haste neither man noted a spying head on a distant ridge.

Night shut down on them heavily. Single file and silent, they rode northward for several hours. Blaze, in the lead, pulled up sharply.

"You see anything?" he demanded.

Pat's dim bulk loomed up beside him.

"Yeah," slowly. "Looks like a fire a long way off. Yeah, Blaze, our shack would be about there. We better save our horses—mebbe we'll soon be needin' all they got."

There was a curious indifference in his tone, utterly unlike the fiery young Irishman. He wheeled his horse, now in the lead, and the pace

was slow. So it was nearly dawn when they reached the south range once more.

It was grey dawn when they realized that the south range held no cattle!

"Today I hunt up Shade Sloan an' shoot him down!"

Calmly voiced, without the seething, blistering words of natural rage, these words were doubly deadly. When Pat Hurley talked that way somebody always died by gunfire but, in this case, it might be Pat Hurley who died! For Shade Sloan never rode the purple sage except at the head of a pack of man-killers!

Instantly aware of the final disaster, Blaze gripped him strongly, shook him fiercely.

"Cuss! Rave! Paw the air!" he commanded harshly. "Do anything to blow off steam an' get back your good sense. Pat, when you go, I'm goin'. I'm just askin' you to wait until we get an even break—"

"We been waitin' too long!" exploded Pat. "Waitin' at one end of our range while Shade runs off our cows at the other! Waitin' in black holes while the night is lit up by our burnin' buildin's! While we been waitin' he done took everything we had—except this beltful of bullets. Well, I'm givin' him *them* free—without no waitin'!"

"He needs killin' bad," agreed Blaze seriously, "but I'm not aimin' to die without takin' along plenty of company. Right now we've got no chance."

"We ain't never goin' tuh get no better chance—"

"We'll build ourselves one," argued Blaze. "Shade's playin' too big a game for only us two to buck. He took the trouble to whip us slow, when he could have done it quick. I want to live long enough to find out why. We can't prove anything by dyin' now."

"We kin prove tuh Shade that here's a couple tough rannies he can't scare!"

"Prove that to these honest cow outfits around here," Blaze insisted. "Between us we can get 'em organized and get enough guns behind us to stop Shade and his killers."

"Organize—hell!" grated Pat. "What happened when yuh rode down tuh the Diamond S last week tuh visit friendly with the owner, what's his name? Ed Stark. He run yuh off! Why?"

"He's worried," explained Blaze. "He's only got six riders who were hired to fatten beef, and not bleed men. But the Bar-shoe-bar took on some tough Texans. I talked to one young rannie named Clint Tenny. He's a salty gent, looks like he could sling a fast gun but he isn't talkin' right out loud."

"Well, I am!"

"Listen, Pat. These outfits are all newcomers like us, thinkin' since the Government whipped the Apaches they could raise cattle unhampered. They run up against somethin' worse—Shade Sloan! They

don't know the country good. Hardly know their neighbors. You can't blame 'em none for mindin' their own business and sendin' strangers on their way. Let's ride across the valley to the Double K spread. They'll take us on after we tell 'em what happened to us—"

"Yeah!" bellowed Pat furiously. "We come whinin' at the back door fer a couple measly ridin' jobs after us bein' ranch owners! Not me! I said I was huntin' up Shade today!"

"The day ain't hardly started. We haven't had our mornin' coffee yet."

"Didn't know they was any left." Pat brightened visibly. "Beans too, huh? I was figurin' on only a cigarette."

They managed a scant meal on all that remained of the provisions, all that Shade Sloan had not taken. Between bites, Blaze kept up a running fire of talk, advancing further reasons to soothe his fuming partner and stop any rash action.

Soon, his grumbling stomach appeased, Pat was listening somewhat tolerantly to sensible advice. Later, with a cigarette to calm his nerves, Pat was grinning. More, Blaze had caught his interest with a daring scheme.

"We ride on the owl-hoot trail," he suggested. "We've got some pay comin' from Shade—and we collect it! We don't bother any honest man, just the one that took all we had."

"Man! What a humdinger!" cheered Pat. "Beat Shade at his own game! Grab what he gets! Let's ride!"

"Hold it" commanded Blaze. "We've got plenty work to do before that happens. We're not buckin' Shade's big outfit—just us two! Sure, we're ridin'—east and away from this territory."

Pat rolled himself another stinted smoke and cuffed his hat over one eye. He forked his bronc willingly.

"Well, since we ain't runnin' out I'm sittin' in yore game."

"No, we're not runnin'," agreed Blaze as they loped toward the Double K spread. "Damn! If I knew this section better I could maybe figure out what Shade's after. He's got some special reason—"

"Tuh Hell with any reasons except ours!" burst out Pat. "The only thing that'll stop Shade is a slug uh lead an' I'm doin' that the minute I get him lined up over my gunsight!"

Blaze sighed in mock exasperation.

"You're a terrible strain on my nerves, Pat. I'm takin' your word that you'll follow my play. You don't go bangin' your guns until we're ready—"

"All right, all right, Aunty Arabella," yielded Pat.

They were riding east out of the Dos Amigos foothills toward the irregular blue haze of the Sierra Verdes. Before them stretched the broad, rolling expanse of Santa Inez valley. About in the middle

wandered the Santa Inez river, gathering volume from the forks and minor streams which collected water from the folds between irregular foothills. Rich grass invited the appetites of fattening cattle.

"I heard," remarked Blaze, "that this valley was named for a right gentle Spanish Saint, Inez. It sure looks peaceful enough now but wait till that man-killer, Shade, gets goin' good. There'll be blood drippin' in every stream. And all I—Pat! Somethin's up!"

Ahead of the partners was a rise which blocked clear view of the slopes beyond. But, above that rise and outlined plainly enough for their keen eyes, stirred a dust haze. Either horses or cattle were on the trail. Instantly alert, they halted. With the pound of their horses' hoofs silenced, they heard the bawl of cows and the shrill yips of driving riders.

Afoot, and with rifles ready, the partners advanced to the crest cautiously and peered downward. Below lay a trail over which a fair sized herd was being pushed.

"Beef, headed for the Border," commented Blaze.

"Movin' fast an' with plenty help. By Gawd! They been rustled! We finally got the deadwood on Shade!" jubilated Pat.

"That ain't nowise proved. I can't recognize any man at this distance and I'd sure like a near look at those brands."

"We ain't standin' ground-hitched, are we?" demanded Pat. "We fork our broncs an' have us a quick look. You size up the drag an' I'll take the point. Shade's most likely ridin' there—"

"I'm takin' that end!" vetoed Blaze hastily. "We just *look*—once—and fog right back to here where we combine forces and continue as per schedule. You listenin'?"

"That's all I'm doin'," complained Pat. "Let's move!"

Blaze lingered to watch his peppery partner ride away until he saw that Pat was proceeding with reasonable caution. Then he turned south. But, before he had ridden close enough to complete his errand, a single shot followed later by a ripple of gun-fire, spun him about and spurted him back at a headlong gallop.

Either Pat had been ambushed or he had ridden recklessly into danger!

Pat Hurley, starting first and moving faster, had reached a good spying position quickly. There he sprawled behind cover and squinted as he tried to read brands. Hampered by the dust, he had no success until a dissatisfied cow broke from the herd and headed for her home range at a bounding lope. Diagonally across Pat's position she ran, a whopping rider spurring vigorously to flank her. Pat caught one clear glimpse of the brand.

Distinctly he saw the initials "B-H" which had been burned into that cow's hide. That one cow was a symbol of wrecked dreams. Dreams that Pat Hurley and Blaze Brill had shared.

No hope of calm deliberation then! Spitting seething curses like a maddened wildcat, the reckless young Irishman threw his rifle into a glinting alignment with the racing rider's stomach. The screaming lead tore through its mark. A man's body left the saddle to strike the earth jarringly, there to collapse.

Brief confusion, as hard-eyed rustlers milled about at various angles to catch movement which might betray the attacker. Now the drumming of many hoofs. Alert riders converging on the dead body. Sudden scattering as the raging Pat Hurley blasted out the staccato explosions of cartridges as fast as he could sight and pull trigger. Men leaping from saddles as they yanked rifles from saddle boots, hunting cover on a far-flung circle. A short silence before the grim coming of further death.

In that calm the galloping beat of Blaze Brill's horse boomed loudly. He spurred up the hill and tumbled off to wedge his sweating body into a crack beside his partner. The shelter they had was pitifully scant, merely stunted strubbery clawing for a root-hold among a scattering of boulders.

Shade Sloan had recognized Blaze with astonishment. Last night's raid should have broken the hearts of these two, terrorized them, sent them scurrying for safety, glad of the cover of darkness. Yet here they were! In broad daylight. Not only not running but daring to challenge overwhelming odds!

Their very presence was a menace to Shade. They were eyewitnesses of outlawry, able to testify some day when impersonal and unbribable Law should come. Dangerous, always, until silenced.

"Send 'em tuh Hell!" ordered Shade.

He scattered his pack with grim gestures and spread them shrewdly. Then waved them on to tighten from all directions.

Rifles stuttered spasmodically at first in preliminary skirmish, then settled into a steady roar.

Blaze and Pat threw bullets skillfully, but they lay ringed overwhelmingly. Fingers of lead began to poke at them. Slap stingingly at hats, clothes—and one stung flesh! Pat Hurley got that!

Sickened by the pain, Pat shuddered and fought for steadiness to return to his nerves. It was not a fatal wound but the searing fire would sap his strength quickly.

"Only let me last," he gritted, "until my ca'tridges is gone!"

Beside him a dull thump announced that Blaze was hit.

Pat twisted his head and stared anxiously.

"Left arm," gasped his partner. "Not bad."

Now lead laced an unbroken web over the stricken partners. Pat Hurley, thumbing the final cylinder of explosive into the rifle chamber, grinned as the missile leaped into life—grinned, and lost life through a hole in his heart!

Blaze Brill, two ribs cracked and left arm numb, fired once more, was tightening finger again when his broad Stetson caved on one side. The head which it had covered sank suddenly.

After a cautious wait, Shade Sloan advanced warily. Then he stalked up the slope, shoved spurred boots under the bleeding bodies and kicked them over—face up.

"Now," he stated casually, "we kin finish the rest uh our important business."

Chapter 3

THE horse was too nearly exhausted longer to dread the smell of blood or to be spurred on by the slap of dangling arms and boots on either flank. A dead man hung stiffly behind the saddle—in it slouched a rider barely alive.

This man had passed ability to guide his mount, the reins almost escaped the weak restraint of his fingers. His left forearm, wrapped in a crude bandage, hung limp. Blood had coagulated on his head, it still seeped from his ribs. Eyes closed, only the instinctive clutch of practiced thigh muscles kept him in the saddle. The horse clumped onward, slowly. . . .

In the town of Salud, tanned hands tilted the gruesome burdens off a staggering horse and keen frontier eyes were busy reading signs of terrible ordeal.

"This one we gotta bury—quick -but the other we kin maybe pull through —although he's bled like a stuck hawg," was the verdict. "Somebody see if Doc Stevens ain't too drunk tuh walk. While we're waitin' let's try a slug uh whiskey on this one."

The stinging liquor forced a choking cough. Between the partly opened lids appeared two slits of clear blue, but the brain behind those eyes was clouded. The man moved feebly and muttered.

Doc Stevens was quite drunk, as usual, but his professional training sobered him at sight of a suffering human being. He stayed sober until the stranger was convalescent, then went on a spree that left him nearly as dead as his patient had been.

Some days later, a law officer quietly entered the sleeping stranger's room. For a time he stood studying the thinned face, then he lowered his body into a chair. Straining wood protested and the noise woke the sleeper. Keen blue eyes looked up inquiringly.

"I'm Buck Cleary, chief deputy sheriff of Pago County," the other introduced himself.

"Pago County?" puzzled the stranger. "Can't be. How'd I get here?"

"On a half-dead hawse. Where from I dunno, except from south some place—mebbe the Border. It's kinda late, but if yuh tell me where this ruckus took place I'll have a look an' see if I kin mebbe do somethin' about it."

Returning recollection hardened the pinched face.

"My partner—"

"Yuh brought him in—dead!"

The blue eyes dimmed, reddened slightly. Then steel glints appeared. The man's body lifted slowly, rising weakly. Cleary's hand easily restrained him.

"Lemme up! Where's my guns?"

"In my office. I cleaned an' oiled 'em. They'll keep a few days without spoilin'. Yuh'll have tuh buy some ammunition an' they wasn't no money in yore pockets."

"All gone?"

"Yeah. Nothin' but empties—ca'tridges an' pockets," returned the chief deputy meaningly. "Stranger, I'm aimin' tuh find out what happened. Start waggin' yore jaw."

"That's my business! You figure I'm on the dodge?"

The chief deputy stirred uneasily.

"I ain't said so. But usual," he stated heavily, "a honest hombre ain't clampin' down on the truth thisaway! If yuh got any reasons, they can't be good ones."

"I got 'em and they're good," was the answer. "The Law is excused if it's ignorant. Meanin' that if you knew men were goin' to die by premeditated gunfire, you'd consider it your duty to prevent said act."

"Which I would!" stated Buck Cleary. "In Pago County."

The stranger grinned suddenly. The conditional stipulation tacked on by Cleary had registered.

"But outside your jurisdiction?" he tempted. "Hell, you Irish are all alike. Any excuse, or none at all, to mix in a fight. Us Germans have to be prodded right scandalous before we get fightin' mad—*but I've been prodded to the outside limit!*"

Glints like sunlight on bared steel sparkled in the bed-ridden man's eyes. His voice jerked painfully as he continued.

"Pat—my pard, the one—I brought in—was Irish, too."

Cleary leaned forward.

"Pat—was it? An' his other name'll be what? Yuh'll be wantin' tuh mark his grave proper."

"I'll tend to that later," decided the stranger.

The deputy sheriff's eyes hardened again.

"The name ain't 'Sloan'—by any chance?" he whispered.

That brought the desired reaction! Weakened by wounds, not fully alert, the stranger fell into the trap. Wide open burst the dam of his reserve. Out spewed the tale of deadly war. The last fight with Pat

Hurley dying at his (Blaze Brill's) side. Returning to consciousness and pain during the chill of desert night. Loading the body of his pard on a faithful horse and then—a delirious ride with raw instinct only in the saddle.

Cleary listened with close attention to the end.

"This clears things—some," he said slowly. "Our office got a letter before yuh rode in which wasn't nohow written calm. It give us a rough idea about a run-in between some ranchers an' Shade Sloan's gang. A couple wounded men bein' chased this way. Yore name was mentioned but I can't figure yet from that letter whether I was to kill yuh—or kiss yuh."

"Who sent it?"

"Don't know. Wasn't signed. Yuh got any ideas?"

"None whatever," answered Blaze seriously. "Those hombres that were reported headin' this way, now. It couldn't have been me and Pat was meant, because no one saw that ruckus but Shade's men and they left us for dead."

Cleary, looking anywhere but at Blaze, spoke casually.

"Yuh ain't been triflin' with the affections of no female woman, have yuh?"

"Me? Hell no!" jerked out Blaze. "What's bitin' you?"

"That letter was spelled better'n these rannies around here kin manage. Has Shade got any women trailin' with his string?"

"Might have, I don't know. I'm guessin' Shade drifted back a few days later to where we had our run-in and found our bodies gone. He reads sign plenty intelligent and knows at least one of us wasn't plumb dead. That don't leave him nowise easy in his mind. He can't afford to let any eyewitness stay alive.

"It might take some time to check up on all the wounded men in this section but he could do it! Maybe he sent that letter himself, mixin' his words on purpose so that any law officer would hold me on suspicion until his killers could hunt me down."

"Yeah, he might, at that," drawled Cleary.

"I'd feel a heap easier if I had my guns right handy," said Blaze uneasily. "I'm not aimin' to be dry-gulched in bed!"

"I'm ridin' herd on yuh personal," assured Cleary. "Get yore strength back an' don't let this disturb yore rest none."

He did not add that Blaze's keen estimate of the situation agreed with his own, nor that several strangers had drifted into town recently—among them a young and pretty woman!

The girl had come to his office, nervousness darkening her velvet brown eyes.

"Have there been any shootings—in the last few days?" she had asked anxiously. "I mean—serious ones?"

"Who, exactly, was yuh worryin' about?"

"My—my brother! He—quarreled with Dad—they're both quite headstrong—and he left the ranch—"

"Alone?"

"Yes—alone. But I haven't heard a word from him since then. I'm worried!"

"If he come here alone," said Cleary thoughtfully, "you couldn't have sent this letter now, could yuh?"

The deputy suddenly pushed the note across his desk.

"No—of course not!" fluttered the girl.

"That's right," agreed Cleary slowly. "This mentions two hombres—bad wounded, one uh them named Blaze Brill. You know him?"

"No, I've never as much as—heard of him! Is he the man—in the hotel—who nearly died?"

"Yeah. The other one he brought in—we buried. But," continued Cleary, "unless yore brother's name was Pat Hurley, you ain't worryin' none about dead men. What *is* his name?"

"My brother? It's Smith, George W."

"Yore first name's likely 'Mary'?"

"Why—yes! How could you possibly guess?"

The deputy grinned but gave no answer.

"Yore brother, now. What makes yuh think he might'a been shot up? Was he gunnin' fer somebody?"

"No-o. But he—drinks when he's very angry—and Dad gave him enough reason—"

"What was they fightin' about—runnin' the spread?"

"No, about brother's drinking."

"I can't recall no Smith around here," puzzled Cleary. "What do yuh call yore spread?"

"Our ranch? It's called the—the Box S."

"Not in Pago County," stated Cleary positively. "They's a Diamond S down south in San Luis."

"But our ranch lies north!" cut in Mary Smith hastily. "There is no connection whatever!"

"Well, I'll be watchin' this town right careful," assured Cleary. "Yuh done looked over every hombre, I expect, an' yore brother ain't here?"

"I don't think so," hesitated the girl. "But there's one room in the hotel where several men are hiding. Who are they?"

"Gun-slicks!" answered Cleary grimly. "Nothin' fer you tuh worry yore pretty head about. I'm ridin' herd on 'em—personal!"

The girl gave him a searching look. Then she stood up and her manner was calm.

"That makes everything safe," she declared and left the office.

The chief deputy sheriff watched her close the door.

"Safe—Hell!" he snapped. "Nothin's safe! That gal's been lyin' right strenuous. She ain't got no more brother than I have. Then who in Hell *is* she worryin' about? Them strange riders—or is it that sick Blaze Brill? Me, I'm fair hauntin' that hotel!"

Suspicious and alert, Cleary surprised the girl that night, lurking in the dark hall of the hotel.

"What you doin' here?" he demanded.

"Why—why, I'm going down to get some fresh water," stammered the girl. "Mine is hot—and stale."

Cleary jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"*That* way is down, ma'am!"

She thanked him and hurried away, but the deputy remained where he was.

"Havin' lived here myself," was his thought, "I know that water's both stale an' hot, like she claims. But, I'm damn shore she was either listenin' at that door, or she was ready tuh go in! Them rannies is killers! Shore as Hell they's bein' paid by Shade Sloan! Now, if she was set to go in there, she's here fer no good reason. If she was jest listenin', then she's got someone else on her mind—mebbe Blaze Brill!

"Damn! Why ain't Charley Burwash back like he promised? He'd shore settle my mind quick on this!"

But the dishonorably discharged Burwash was away on business important to him. His mission now being the utter destruction of Shade Sloan and all that he represented, Charley had more work on his hands than he had time.

Much of his work was blind prying into the affairs of many men, any that came even remotely in contact with Shade. As was to be expected, there were many dead ends. Consequently, Charley was delayed.

On the following night another letter reached Buck Cleary.

"Blaze Brill," read the brief note, "*is to be killed tonight!* He's too sick to fight his own war, so it's up to you to show your colors, elected Lawman! Whatever you do is being watched. Are you honest, Cleary?"

The note was unsigned.

"Am I honest?" rumbled Cleary's indignant growl. "Show my colors, huh? Hell! Does anybody think I'm as rotten as them San Luis County mavericks?"

His answer was marked by action, the surest proof. He placed into Blaze Brill's hands two carefully oiled and loaded guns. Long-snouted Remington .44 "five-guns."

"I don't nohow like the looks uh this deal," he explained grimly. "Jest after dark tonight I'm cartin' yuh tuh jail where me an' a couple trusted gun-slingers is surroundin' it right alert. I spotted two killers that'll likely make a try fer yuh but I ain't nowise shore I covered 'em all. Kin you sling a gun on the off-chance somebody gets through me?"

"These are my own guns," answered Blaze eagerly. "I shore can use 'em flat on my back or straight up! I'm walkin' to jail."

"That'd be better," agreed Cleary. "It'll leave my gun hand free. Yuh feel strong enough fer the trip?"

"I couldn't have any better tonic!" snarled Blaze. "I can hardly wait for night!"

They started under cover of the first darkness of evening. One man ahead, Cleary escorting Blaze a bit later and the third guard following. Using the darkest path, they went slowly and cautiously.

From the hotel porch came a yell of warning:

"Buck! Watch—"

Further words were lost in the shattering roar of guns. Cleary had scant time to recognize that call as from Charley Burwash when—ahead—flickering flame cut across the blackness. Beside him Blaze Brill went down. The deputy sheriff had no time to examine his charge, he was immediately defending his own life.

But for the darkness, death should have marked up a greater score since these were gun-experts, law and outlaw both. As it was, the bellowing uproar raged only briefly, faded into sullen spasms and ceased altogether.

"Blaze! Yuh hurt bad?"

This was Cleary's first speech, close as an echo upon the last pistol shot.

"Not any, Buck," assured Blaze as he slowly pushed his body erect. "That sudden shootin' took all the starch out of my knees. I just fell flat and laid there tremblin'."

Willing arms lent their strength to his weakened body.

Cleary then found four dead men, one a deputy shot through the back. Charley Burwash had seen that happen.

He stood on the hotel porch and explained.

"I just got here. I was standin' here an' lookin' over the town when I seen two hombres run past me intuh the street. I saw guns gleamin' in their hands an' one, while he was cuttin' across the hotel lights, I knew was Shade Sloan's man. That was enough fer me—especial when I seen his lead ploughin' intuh yore deputy's back, Buck. Then I cut loose. I got that one, but the other dodged intuh the dark—I dunno what become uh him."

"Likely Blaze got him, Charley," explained Buck. "Bein' sick, he was layin' on his stomack, an' mebbe he seen a shadow against the lights."

"Who is this Blaze hombre," demanded Charley, "what shoots flat on his face?"

"A right good man," returned Buck. "On his face or standin' on his hind laigs! Yuh'll met him right soon. But first, we gotta find out what happened tuh my deputies."

Further ahead, close to the jail, they found a deputy who was badly wounded. His gun was hot.

"I emptied it right sudden when two hombres cut down on me," he explained. "One's layin' out there some place. The other yelled an' high-tailed it. He's hit, but not bad enough tuh keep him from ridin'—"

"Hell!" swore Cleary suddenly. "Us standin' here an' him makin' a clean getaway! Fork yore broncs, men, an' meet me in front of the hotel. I gotta chore tuh do there."

He had just thought of "Mary Smith."

He burst eagerly into the girl's room but he found it empty. Signs of hasty flight were evident, but no girl.

Cleary swore disgustedly.

"I must be losin' what little brains I got," he muttered. "One woman is jest one too many fer me tuh figger out. Here I'm ready tuh believe she's square, helpin' out Blaze fer some secret reason of her own, an' now she lights out with Shade's gunman."

With two fugitives to catch, Cleary himself led the posse. But, though they rode hard and searched keenly, the delay and the darkness had permitted escape. Weary and disappointed, Cleary came back to Salud to hold a spirited conference. He pulled Charley Burwash into his office for a preliminary talk.

"We done give Shade Sloan a right good lesson," he stated grimly. "Three uh his gun-slicks dead an' another carryin' away our lead will learn him tuh keep outta Pago County! But I got somethin' yuh kin help me on. Have you seen Shade playin' the women any?"

"Right frequent. He likes tuh mix 'em with his liquor."

"Dancehall fillies, huh? How about the other kind?"

"What other kind would live around here?"

"I dunno," said Cleary doubtfully. "But suppose they was a respectable woman come in. Would Shade make a play fer her an' would she, mebbe, string along with him—some?"

"He shore would! An' she—might! He's a handsome devil an' his tongue is plenty slick. Let's have the rest of this, Buck."

Cleary pulled out the two letters and extended them to Charley a bit reluctantly.

"That one comes first—kinda wild when it gets tuh the part where Blaze Brill is described as bein' bad hurt an' chased by Shade's hellions. Then he arrives—jest about makin' it. Next—this gal shows up a heap disturbed, but she's only worryin' about a brother accordin' tuh her story."

"These letters ain't signed," pointed out Charley.

"No they ain't," admitted Cleary. "I could'a made a play that I needed a legal complaint, written out an' signed right regular. Then I could'a compared 'em."

"You got any idees?" asked Burwash thoughtfully.

"Allowin' fer the writin' bein' disguised, them letters was wrote by the same hand—a woman's hand—an' she's the one that done lit out when that ruckus started. The evidence ain't all in, but offhand it shore looks like she must'a knowed Blaze, mebbe right personal, an' he throwed her down. That'd be good enough reason fer her goin' over tuh Shade, yammerin' for revenge."

"So far, so good," nodded Charley. "What next?"

"Then, when Shade sets out tuh kill Blaze she changes her mind an' rides hellbent tuh save his life. But she don't nohow look like no honky-tonk gal an' if she ain't this hull thing don't make no sense!"

Charley Burwash laughed.

"Hell, Buck, no man ever found sense in what a woman does when her heart is busted. Didn't Blaze know her?"

"He never saw her—here. Anyhow, he'd lie like a gent about her. He claimed he didn't even know no women around here. Charley, I'm turnin' these letters over tuh you tuh help build up yore own private case against Shade. Find that woman an' use these letters right sensible. She's tied up with Shade somehow. Connect Blaze with her an' yuh got somethin' hot tuh work on."

"We might flash them letters on him unexpected," mused Charley thoughtfully. "Call him in an' we'll try it."

Blaze was invited to join the conference and he used the brief moments of introduction to study Charley Burwash. He saw a middle-aged, square-jawed man, with the wrinkles of serious thought spreading fanwise from outside eyecorners and downward in the space between eyebrows. Grey hair over widespread temples shading into sparse, dark-colored hair above. Charley was square in features, body and character.

Burwash, curtly acknowledging introduction, spread the letters abruptly before Blaze and settled back to analyze reactions. The experiment was fruitless. Blaze was interested, nothing more. As he read, a delighted grin spread his lips.

"Damn if this ain't good!" he chuckled. "One of Shade's dames riskin' her life to save me! She probably saw me scatterin' across the scenery some place an' fell in love with my innocent blue eyes. You said she was good-lookin', Buck? What's her name?"

"A right uncommon one," sneered the deputy. "It's Smith! First name, Mary."

"Mebbe yuh'd like tuh take her away from Shade," suggested Charley Burwash suddenly.

A hot flush flared against Brill's pale skin.

"When I get through with Shade Sloan he won't have any more use for women!" he grated. "I'm startin' after him in a few days."

"I been after him a year now," stated Burwash grimly. "An' I ain't through with him yet. This time I ain't got the power of the United

States behind me. Unless yore dead set on playin' lone wolf, I'd like tuh throw in with yuh, me an' a Mex pardner that was robbed poor."

"What'd Shade steal from you?"

"My good name as a U. S. Deputy Marshal!"

"Hell, I wasn't aimin' to dig that deep, Charley," apologized Blaze. "This Mex, now, I've never hooked up with—"

"Mexes come good an' bad—like Americans. I'm declarin' Tomas de Miramon is plenty high-class."

"That's aces with me, Charley. If he's throwin' in, let's get together an' make our plans."

"He's got some business near the Border that'll hold him until yuh got yore full strength back. Ain't no use doin' nothin' before that. And remember, jest because we licked the first lot uh gunmen Slade sent after yuh don't mean he might not try again!"

"I'm keepin' my eyes wide open!" stated Blaze.

"But yuh gotta shut 'em at night," was the warning. "Listen, since we gotta stay in the hotel until Tomas comes back, we get our rooms changed. Me on one side uh the hall an' you jest opposite."

"Good idea, Charley. Whichever room they might tackle, there'll be a good man with a gun—behind 'em!"

Charley grinned and extended his hand.

"Blaze, I feel a heap safer now, myself."

Chapter 4

A WEEK later, while the two friends sat in idle gossip on the hotel porch, a lone horseman halted before them. Charley jumped up.

"Tomas de Miramon!' he greeted heartily.

"*Amigo mio!*"

A lean, hard young man leaped up the steps and gripped his friend's hand, then turned bold, black eyes full on Blaze. For a moment they took stock of each other.

"*Our* friend, Tomas," introduced Charley and gave the name.

"Señor Blaze," bowed the Mexican, accepting the endorsement.

Blaze looked him over carefully and liked what he saw. Tomas sparkled with all the finery of a Mexican dandy, but his thonged-down gun was loose in a battered holster. The man was trail-powdered and gaunt from hard riding, but his horse was fresh!

Tomas missed nothing of the scrutiny. He gestured over his shoulder. His grin flashed whitely against his dark skin.

"*Si,* my *caballo* was ver' tired," he informed. "So I 'ave trade weeth my good fran', the Señor Shade Sloan. Good trade, no?"

Blaze matched his broad grin.

"It shore was, Tomas!"

This, a man daring enough to steal a horse from a dangerous enemy, was one to tie to. But Charley seemed nervous.

"Let's get up in my room before we get tuh hoo-rawin' Shade. He's got ears all over. We don't know who's takin' his pay here."

Even upstairs he prowled through the hall and listened at closed doors until the two young men chuckled in amazement.

"Let's get down tuh business," advised Burwash gruffly. "What'd yuh learn, Tomas?"

"Eet ees *muy malo*—ver' bad—*amigos*. Thees Shade he is ron what you call peeg—uh, hawg-wild! Many rancho ees burn'—those udder are scare'—mucho scare'."

"The man's loco!" burst out Blaze.

"Yeah, like a fox," grunted Charley. "Don't forget we let one of his killers get back. Shade knows now all about what happened here, an' that Buck Cleary was warned. Mebbe by yore friend, *Mary Smith*, mebbe by some rancher in his territory that was friendly tuh you. Some uh them ranchers must'a been in cahoots with him but now he can't trust nobody. So he's wipin' 'em all out!"

"He started that long ago!" grated Blaze. "I can't savvy why he set out to clean up the whole section."

"Tomas done figured that out. Look here—" Charley drew a rough sketch outlining the long, broad oval of Santa Inez valley.

"This whole valley which recent was supportin' yore spread an' five or six others was once Spanish territory an owned by the de Miramon family. Tomas has been ridin' it fer twenty-five years—well, anyhow a good fifteen, ever since he was big enough tuh fork a bronc. So he savvies it plenty.

"Now look at the layout. Not far from the north end uh Santa Inez valley is the new minin' section—hundreds of thousands of dollars in gold, silver, copper an' lead bein' packed out, goin' north an' east. Down here at the south end, is Rustler Pass cuttin' an easy way through the mountains into Mexico where they's plenty Mexes that will get that ore to a good market—"

"Wan hombre," interrupted Tomas quietly. "José Ortega."

"Well, one then," accepted Charley. "But that's enough if he knows his way around. He likely knows where to sell 'wet' cows, too. Anyway, Rustler Pass is the only good way out through Santa Inez.

"But, strung thick along this valley was this new crop uh ranchers. Ain't it clear why Shade's wreckin' every one?"

"Hell, yes!" spat Blaze tensely. "If his game is stage-robbin', cattle-rustlin' or stealin' gold it doesn't need any heavy brains to know he must have a clean getaway down that valley through Rustler Pass—without any honest ranchers hamperin' him!"

"Yuh got it!" and *"Si! Si!"* answered him.

"But," added Charley grimly, "how do we 'copper' a play like that? We hain't handlin' no rabbits!"

"None whatever," admitted Blaze. "We must get some help. What became of all those riders the de Miramons had?"

Burwash hesitated.

"We gotta let that angle alone fer a while. These pure-blooded Spaniards is right proud. Way back, mebbe five hundred years ago a fellah named Coronado—"

"Señor, onlee t'ree hondert year w'en Francisco Vasquez Coronado 'ave come weeth Don Carlos de Miramon to hont for La Mina Perdida."

"Yuh see?" stressed Burwash. "He knows it all by heart.. This Coronado didn't find no Lost Mine—he didn't even find no gold—but he found plenty land. In them days the Spanish Gov'ment done passed it out right promiscuous—in chunks bigger'n Arizona. This Don Carlos de Miramon took a heap uh it—an' passed it down from father tuh son—generation after generation."

"I'm beginning to understand," mused Blaze.

"Not all," contradicted Charley. "Jest recent the U. S. had a bickerin' with the Mex Gov'ment. When it ended the Mexes give up a big slice uh land—an' most uh it belonged tuh the de Miramons! They hadda quit livin' like kings—they couldn't even pay their help. Them old-time *vaqueros* is scattered from here tuh hell-an'-gone! That's a plenty bitter pill fer them proud Dons tuh swallow—"

"Forget it!" cut in Blaze quickly. "I ask too many questions. Let's recruit here."

"Ain't nobody else in Salud wants none uh Shade's fight."

"Then we get our help from those ranchers that got the same dose me and Pat and Tomas got."

"*Amigo,*" remarked Tomas gently, "zose hombres 'ave been hurt *muy malo!* Ver' bad! Zey mu' ron away—no chance for fight."

"Give 'em their chance!" insisted Blaze. "Three tough rannies like us are enough to swing the odds in their favor. Tomas, you know the country and Charley knows Shade."

"Yeah. I know him an' his style," agreed Charley. "But all I know about him an' his doin's ain't enough legal proof tuh hang him."

"Then we must outsmart him," declared Blaze.

"Yuh got a plan?"

"Me'n Pat Hurley made one up. We figured Shade needed money to keep goin', so we aimed to hamper him plenty by takin' away honest what he gathered plumb dishonest."

"Owl-hootin'?" disapproved Charley.

"Only from Shade," defended Blaze. "Isn't that legal?"

"Passin' up that viewpoint," evaded the former law officer, "Shade's spent plenty in buyin' up his men or electin' 'em sorta legal. He's, moreover, payin' big money tuh his gun men an' splittin' his winnin's

here an' there until he gets ready tuh operate on net profit. I'm guessin' that he's ready fer that right now."

"But he can't keep on payin' unless somethin's comin' in," argued Blaze. "So, with the help of a few more exasperated rannies that've suffered plenty, we step in and take away everything that Shade manages to get. Santa Inez, the valley of safety for him, turns out to be a trap."

"I can't rightly adjust myself," demurred Charley. "Stealin' is jest plain stealin', even if yuh steal from an outlaw. And what chance have we got, us three, against Slade an' his picked gunmen?"

"Tomas knows the country. He plans our getaways. We hit quick and run!" declared Blaze.

"What's that?" demanded Charley suddenly. He stood for a moment listening intently, then flung open the door widely. Up and down the hall his glances darted. He turned back to his friends.

"You hear anything?"

They shook their heads.

"I hope," muttered Charley, "I hope that nobody else heard nothin'."

"Let's have a drink," suggested Blaze casually and Tomas nodded agreement.

Somebody else *had* heard something—just as others in Shade Sloan's pay had heard, at intervals, since the day Blaze Brill had been traced to the town of Salud.

The first to report back was the badly wounded gunman who had run desperately to escape Buck Cleary's possee more than a week ago.

Sloan had watched that man ride up and fall from the horse.

Bandaged expertly and braced by liberal doses of whiskey the man presently lay gasping out his story at the feet of his leader.

"Shade—we done our best! Three of us—is still—in Salud. Dead! We didn't have no chance. Cleary was tipped off—by a woman—"

"A woman!" interrupted Shade tersely. "Who?"

"I never seen her before—"

"Tucson! Drag in every gal we got. *Pronto!*"

They were dragged in—some by the hair—and yet, though the dying gunman scanned each face, he shook his head weakly.

"None uh them."

"Who the Hell else?" raved Shade. "Tucson! Raid the ranches, bring in every woman yuh find—wait! It won't do no good!"

The face before his feet was ashen. His hired gunman could never again identify any woman.

Later came a man, undamaged.

He told of listening outside the thin-boarded room which had been occupied by Blaze Brill, Charley Burwash and Tomas de Miramon. He repeated all that had been said and planned in that room and add-

ed that Charley Burwash had nearly caught him by suddenly opening the door.

Shade ignored the narrow escape. He pointed a finger.

"Didn't they talk about a woman?"

"Yeah—but they couldn't figger out who she was."

"Damn!" raged Shade, himself puzzled. "Who is that dame? But—one thing at a time. You, 'Montana,' come here."

"Montana" stood before him, slouched lazily, not in the least awed by greatness.

"Three tough hombres," stated Shade impressively, "is leavin' Salud at dawn tomorrow, headed fer Santa Inez valley. What way would they come?"

"Only one way," was the confident answer. "Through 'Dead Men Pass.'"

"When?"

"About noon."

"You pick yoreself four other good men," ordered Shade. "An' leave them three layin' there—about noon! Savvy?"

Into this menace which Shade Sloan had prepared for them rode three reckless sons of the Southwest.

Toward noon, the reckless light in the Mexican's bold black eyes was subdued to sombreness. He eyed a ragged slash in the mountains ahead uneasily. Blaze, observant, slowed his horse.

"What's this we're comin' to, Tomas?"

"*El paso los Hombres Muertos,*" the words were low, awed.

"Dead Men Pass," translated Blaze freely and drew rein.

"You do not like those name?"

"None whatever," confessed Blaze. "What's it like, inside? It just don't *feel* right."

"Ah!" The Mexican breathed deeply. "Eet ees bad place, ver' tight—uh, narrow. You theenk Señor Shade know thees place? Maybe he know we come here, no?"

"It's more'n likely," grunted Charley. "I'm glad you young'uns is beginnin' tuh think right sensible."

"If I was Slade I'd plant some rifles in those rocks," stated Blaze seriously. "I'm hankerin' for a look inside that pass. From the *other* side. Tomas, do you know a way around?"

"*Si,* but we lose wan hour."

"Maybe it'll be worth it."

The Mexican nodded and swung his horse sharply to the right. Some distance up a dry wash he turned left, thence upward in zigzag bounds until, at the crest, they paused to breathe their horses.

Without knowing this laborious detour to be necessary it seemed a waste of time but, when they reached level ground on the opposite

side, they knew they owed their lives to caution. Tomas, riding in the lead, flung up his hand in a gesture for silence.

Ahead, slouched on lazy legs, five horses waited sleepily.

"So, there's five of Shade's gun-slicks waitin' in that pass," commented Blaze. He slid off his horse and passed the reins to Tomas.

He approached the five horses with a careless leisure that woke no startled snorts. They eyed him indifferently, accepted his authority without protest. Humming a soothing tune, Blaze gathered the reins and, without haste, led them into a small canyon. There, as calmly as though he worked in his own corral, Blaze stripped off saddles and bridles. Freed, the horses grazed a bit and then headed for the open range.

Retreat of the ambushers had been cut off.

Their own horses securely tied, the three men scouted the pass, rifles aglint in the white sunlight. They found their quarry easily, three flannel-shirted backs within certain rifle range. Further ahead two men stood erect, craning their necks forward in growing uneasiness. Plainly, they could not understand the nonappearance of their intended victims.

Blaze squinted at the positions of the lurking five.

"I'll crawl to the opposite wall. When I get set I'll fire one shot of warnin' and then—pour lead!"

"Them hombres wasn't figurin' on givin' us no warnin'," snarled Burwash savagely. "But have it yore way. Only, after that, plug 'em dead center. We can't be hampered with no wounded!"

Blaze nodded. In this war no quarter could be given.

Ambushing the ambushers was a simple matter. Mowed down by merciless accuracy, three of Shade Sloan's killers collapsed after a furious flurry of fire. And then the two that remained died equally bloody deaths.

"Three in Salud and these five here adds up to eight!" summed up Blaze savagely. "Poor old Pat Hurley would shore rejoice at that tally!"

"Yeah, an we're pilin' it higher!" rasped Charley. "When Shade finds out about this we'll be dodgin' all the lead he kin fling. He won't mebbe find out fer a day but after that we can't be doin' much day dreamin'."

"*Si!* That ees more *bueno*—good, my fran'. By day we sleep. Ride een night, no? Señor Shade 'ave too many eyes watchin' ze trails w'ere we mus' go."

"Yuh done called the right play, Tomas," agreed Charley. "So jest find us a place tuh hole up. Better make it off this trail a piece so's Shade won't be steppin' on us if he decides tuh ride this way today."

The Mexican nodded and led off rapidly with his destination already fixed in his mind. A side canyon, wooded and watered, sheltered them

that day and they slept undisturbed through the light and heat. An all night ride brought them well within the reach of Shade Sloan and his wolf-pack.

Blaze sniffed the before-dawn breeze and muttered:

"I can almost smell skunk. Are we that close, Tomas?"

"*Seguro.* But for thees dark, señor, you would know."

With the coming of day Blaze recognized the country. He was near the east slope of the Dos Amigos mountains, somewhat south of his old range. He knew he was close to the Bar-shoe-bar headquarters although he had ridden that way only once.

"I don't know much about this spread, except I talked to one of their young riders, Clint Tenny," informed Blaze. "I'd better ride ahead alone, those rannies don't take to strangers. But they're salty hombres that would be a big help if we could get them to join us."

"You give us time tuh get set so's we kin cover yore retreat—jest in case!" growled Charley. "Not tellin' what yuh'll run up against. We ain't takin' no chances."

Tomas nodded serious agreement and the three rode cautiously until Blaze pointed.

"You could cover me good from that ridge ahead. The Bar-shoe-bar buildin's are just beyond in a hollow."

Charley and Tomas spread right and left while Blaze continued center. They were all still within hail of each other when they stopped as one man, eyes locked on a dark huddle near the crest of the ridge. Triply wary, they advanced at a walk.

Dead men manned the ridge!

Blaze crept upward and raised his head above the top. He drew his breath sharply. Where the Bar-shoe-bar buildings had once stood only blackened embers lay scattered! The spread was wrecked!

Blaze waved a hand to his partners.

"We got here too late!" he called.

Chapter 5

SCOUTING on all sides, they read the tale of tragedy, of savage, wolf-like range slaughter.

Clearly enough, Shade Sloan had led his pack in a vicious attack, flinging lead from the crest of the ridge while others had circled to the rear, there to lurk until they were able to set fire to the house which sheltered the besieged ones.

Two carcasses which had once been men lay burned beyond recognition among the ashes; a third, running to escape the terrible heat, had run into a hail of lead. Punctured like a sieve, his body sprawled free of the ruins. Unburied dead were strewn in a rough circle about them

"Them few Bar-shoe-bar rannies done right noble." approval! lightened the harsh lines of Blaze Brill's face. "But I know the spread carried some nine or ten riders. What became of the rest? If we find them we'll add some ravin' wild cats to our string!"

"Ain't much chance uh trailin' 'em," grumbled Charley. "This must'a happened a couple, three days ago an' the sign is clean gone. What other spreads is close?"

"The Diamond S is nearest, about six or seven miles south. Let's hit down there."

Tomas shook his head doubtfully.

"We ride, *si,* but I'm theenk we fin' only *hombres muertos*—dead men —an' burn' place. But we 'ave look, no?"

The Mexican's ominous foreboding was realized when they had covered those miles southward. The Diamond S had been ravished as badly as its neighbor to the north. Blaze cried out:

"They got old Ed Stark! This is him. Hell! He ain't only half dressed—his outfit was jumped late at night."

"Look at the way them bodies is strung out, they must'a made a runnin' fight outta it," mused Charley Burwash. "It's more'n likely some got clear, it bein' dark."

But his eyes never ceased their restless search.

"What the Hell are you looking for?" asked Blaze.

"I hope," was the grim answer, "I hope it's a gal's body!"

"A girl's body?" demanded Blaze grimly. "You don't mean to say you want to find her—dead?"

Charley lifted his hard eyes.

"Ed Stark had a daughter—young an' right good-lookin'. If Shade Sloan's been here—I wanta find Ed's daughter—mebbe havin' took some lead in the dark accidental, an' still alive, but—her body, anyhow!"

"Is Shade—*that* kind?" demanded Blaze coldly.

"Yes!"

"We look," dictated Blaze. "Close an' careful."

It was the Mexican's voice which broke the silent darkness, later.

"No *Señorita!*" he called. "Onlee *hombres*—I know!"

So did each of them know.

"Mebbe she got free—in the dark like I said," muttered Charley. "We ain't counted enough bodies tuh make up the right tally. Some uh them rannies fought themselves loose an', I'm hopin', they done took Ed's daughter along."

"There's a lot of hombres runnin' around homeless," was the comment from Blaze. "That is, if they ain't got sense enough to high-tail it clear out of this section."

Tomas grinned. "All loco—jus' like us, eh, *amigo?*"

"From what I saw of them," was the serious reply, "they don't run easy. I'm hankerin' to find 'em."

"Me too," agreed Charley. "But I ain't had my reg'lar rest yet. An' I don't do no more huntin' fer trouble out in broad daylight. We better find ourselves a hideout where only two of us sleeps at one time. That way shore cuts down on our sleep plenty—but we'll live a heap longer!"

"That's sensible, Charley," approved Blaze. "In fact, it's the only thing left to do. Look at that!"

He pointed to the southwest. Far off there was movement. Squinting keenly into the distance, the three agreed it was a body of horsemen debouching from a canyon into the open.

"It's too many to be what's left of the burned ranchers," summed up Blaze, "an' they move too damn careless. Hell! That's Shade Sloan an' his pack—on a man hunt!"

The faces of the watchers tightened as the already large cavalcade grew. Man after man rode from the canyon—it seemed endlessly! From deep in the throats of the three came rumbled curses. So wolves might react at sight of deadly danger.

"Man!" snarled Blaze furiously. "Shade's got an army!"

It was a blood-chilling fact. Odds better than ten to one were enough to sober the toughest fighting men, of which these were three. They stared solemnly into each other's eyes, weighing chances as well as the will of each to continue.

"Well—" hesitated Charley, breaking the embarrassed silence. "Well, they ain't no one *forcin'* us tuh commit suicide!"

"No, we can be damn fools on our own hook!" agreed Blaze.

"*Loco!*" Only one word from Tomas but an odd light gleamed in his black eyes.

"Me," came from Burwash heavily, "I'm plain damn' scared of buckin' that layout!"

"My knees is weak," admitted Blaze. "But, anyhow, we can shake hands and then kiss each other before we die."

"*Loco,*" repeated the Mexican, but softly. "Now we fin' some place w'at ees safe, no?"

"Shade'd never think of lookin' for us near the place he seems to be headin' for," suggested Blaze. "He's movin' slow. We could maybe get there ahead of him, grab us a little rest, and be right alert to watch what happens."

The place they were headed for was a badly jumbled portion of the Dos Amigos range, a region of craggy canyons that pointed naked fingers westward into the Alamitos Desert. Here nature had convulsions ages ago, flinging half-molten rock into grotesque shapes that defied classification and lumped them all into a mess best described as "Bad-lands." Here and there, springs spurted from cracks to flow

through sterile boulders, unrelieved by the soft green of vegetation except in a few favored spots.

This was a tract that was desolate and, because it refused to support much animal life, also refused to tolerate sound. Any noise was resentfully tossed between stark walls in thunderous echoes until it fled gladly into space. Anything so offensive as a pistol shot was hounded for rumbling miles before it fainted into a whisper, and died. Sound was driven far through this area.

"Hop to it, *amigos*," advised Blaze. "We gotta ride hard tuh get ahead of Shade where he seems tuh be headin'."

They spurred their horses and arrived at a cleft splitting bare rock. Exploration above uncovered a ledge which hid both men and horses from below. They rubbed down their weary animals and relaxed in the shade of upright rock.

"It's about siesta time," suggested Charley sleepily. "I'm ready for a little shut-eye. Not one of us won't wake up if any horses clatters on the rocks below."

They all agreed and, in an instant, all were asleep.

Hours later, the fact that the expected had not happened stirred them to wakefulness.

Blaze looked over the lip of their ledge.

"I'm goin' down for a close look."

But, though he strained his keen eyes in a rigid inspection of the canyon floor, he found no sign that horses had passed through.

"Shade went some other way," he reported. "We don't meet up with him today, anyhow."

"I like that a heap better," grinned Charley. "I live one more day, now. Let's finish our siesta."

There being nothing better to do, they lay down again. But, toward sundown, they woke suddenly. A sullen throbbing, like remote thunder, reverberated through the cleft. They recognized it instantly for what it was, heavy gunfire.

"Damn if Shade ain't at it again!" growled Charley. "What outfit's gettin' hell now?"

Both Tomas and Blaze shook their heads.

"I don't know of any ranches over that way," puzzled Blaze. "My best guess is that Shade's been combin' the country all afternoon and has finally cornered everyone that's left."

Tomas agreed.

Without a word they tightened cinches. No time could be lost, for the day was fading quickly. Tomas muttered impatiently in Spanish as he guided his horse along. The twisted territory was too broken for swift riding and countless detours delayed them. With nightfall the furious firing somewhere ahead died abruptly.

"They been wiped out!" was Charley's gloomy decision.

"Maybe a few are still alive," hoped Blaze.

"How kin we find 'em without no shootin' tuh steer us?"

"Señores, I'm theenk I know those place," offered Tomas. "Wan time the Señor Shade was try for keel me aroun' here. I ron. I fin' wan hole w'at ees good for, what you call, stan'-off. Eef zos hombres 'ave luck zey are w'ere I'm theenk. Zey are not wipe' out yet. We fin' somebody alive!"

"Hell, Tomas, I'm plumb lost around here," admitted Charley. "If you think we got a chance uh rescuin' anybody from Shade's tender care, jest go ahead. What's yore opinion, Blaze?"

"I'm agreein' with both of you," was the answer. "We're backin' any play you make, Tomas."

"*Gracias, amigo,*" thanked Tomas. "We ride."

They loped through black passages, following the Mexican's confident lead and later came out into easier going. But now they must ride carefully since Shade's men might be patrolling there.

It was while they had halted to listen that the faint clatter of walking horses came to them. Their ears analyzed the sounds and Blaze voiced the opinion of all.

"Only two riders. Not right certain where they're goin'. Kinda nervous. Liable to go bangin' off their guns unless we overawe 'em right sudden."

"Yeah," muttered Charley. "We surround 'em complete an' convince 'em quick. We don't want no shootin'. Anyhow, they might not be some uh Shade's gang. Scatter!"

The two riders came unsuspecting into the trap, halting in dismay to the low chorus of "Yo're covered!" "H'ist 'em!" and "Pronto!" which assailed them from the surrounding darkness.

A stifled cry in an alarmed tenor and a deeper, tense, "Don't shoot! We're droppin' our guns!" answered the orders. Two metallic clanks of six-guns hitting the rocks was assurance that the strangers had yielded without struggle.

Blaze fumbled over their belts and, finding no other weapons, waved his arm toward a darker blur that was Tomas de Miramon.

"Follow him peaceable and you'll live awhile," he advised.

"Thees way, señores," called the Mexican softly. He led back until hollow echoes proclaimed that they had entered a narrow canyon. Then, "*Alto!*" was the order.

By the light of cupped matches the partners examined their prisoners with interest. One was a tanned, wiry young rannie who returned stare for stare, yet with an underlying nervousness that plainly was foreign to his otherwise bold character.

"Ain't you Clint Tenny?" asked Blaze.

"Mebbe. Who're you?"

Blaze twisted his cupped hands to throw light on his face.

Clint squinted sharply.

"Uh—I remember you. Yo're Blaze Brill, ain't you?"

"Right. Who's your—pard?"

Blaze made no effort to conceal his dislike. The other was a slender, scared youngster who appeared misshapen and puny in clothes many sizes too large for him. A big Stetson ballooned over his ears. A smear of blood showed on a bruised cheek and there were traces around the eyes that looked suspiciously like tears.

"Oh, the kid—" answered Clint. "He's my brother. Jim. Shade Sloan's raiders done scared him outta bed an' I hadda outfit him in men's clothes."

"He can't fill 'em nohow!" sneered Blaze. "He isn't fit for the company of hard hombres. Best send him back to his Maw—"

"Fellah! I ain't listenin' to no talk about my fambly!" cut in Clint curtly. "I don't like the shape uh yore ears, either!"

"That rides double!" challenged Blaze but clamped down on his sudden rage. "Hell! No need of startin' any ruckus while we got a tough one boilin'. Are you gunnin' for Shade?"

Clint Tenny promptly forgot his petty annoyance with Blaze in the white heat of stronger emotion. Yet he answered simply:

"It's him—or me!"

"Then shake hands with Charley Burwash and Tomas de Miramon —both gents with the same feelin's. What became of the rest of your outfit, Clint?"

"Ain't seen 'em since the ruckus at the Diamond S—three days ago. But they're standin' off Shade's hull gang some place in these canyons. We was tryin' tuh join up when yuh horned in on us."

"You been on the dodge for three days?" demanded Blaze.

"Yeah, we ain't been eatin' nor sleepin' reg'lar since then. That's why we didn't put up no fight—"

"Shucks!" snorted Charley. "We ain't eat tonight, either. Tomas, kin we risk a fire here?"

"*Si,* a small one—up thees canyon."

A few minutes later, crouched in a cavelike pocket, the five made hungry preparations for a meal. Hunkered on his heels, Blaze manipulated pan and pot while the others chatted.

The puny kid had been helped off his horse by Clint and escorted to a nook in the rocks nearest the small warmth of the fire. There he sat silent, pale and tired, hunched grotesquely in his billowing clothes, rubbing his swollen ankle and nursing the bruise on his cheek. Clint had explained the reason grudgingly, a bad fall from his horse.

From the shadow of his broad hat brim, Blaze shot quick glances at the kid, masking a strong man's disgust for weakness. To his puzzled surprise Blaze discovered that, no matter when he looked at the boy, he was staring into large, dark eyes that followed every move of his

deft hands, his tanned face, his whole body. The kid's eyes glowed with some sort of emotion similar to awe, hero-worship or the homage weakness accords to strength.

Whatever caused it, the inspection irritated the usually calm Blaze Brill. He was glad when his cookery had advanced to the stage when he could call out, "Come an' get it!"

He choked a snort of derision when he saw Clint heap up a tin dish and carry it to the boy. "Can't even help himself to grub!" he thought disdainfully. "But I better tend to my own eatin'. What's got into me, a grown man pickin' on a kid thataway?"

With the satisfaction of filled stomachs and glowing smokes, the men relaxed. Charley told of all that had happened up to the present for Clint's benefit and then Clint supplied the gaps between what the partners had been able to gather from their inspection of the ruined ranches.

"The Bar-shoe-bar an' the Diamond S was both tackled the same night," informed Clint. "We was ready fer trouble after one of our men come in, early evening, sayin' that Shade's gang was headin' fer the Diamond S. Anse Claiborn, our owner, decides he'll ride down to help. His idea was tuh keep Shade so busy that he wouldn't have no time tuh bother the Bar-shoe-bar none.

"That was right good reasonin'—only Shade done foxed us plenty. He must'a been spying on us, an' seein' that we only left a couple hands tuh hold down the Bar-shoe-bar, he fogs there first an' cleans her out—"

"Which he shore done!" growled Charley.

"That ain't all!" snarled Clint. "We waited right impatient down at the Diamond S, mebbe a couple hours, until Anse gets suspicious. He sends a rider back tuh see what he kin see—an' he never comes back!

"That's enough fer Anse. He orders us all tuh burn the trail back, but we ain't gone a mile when Shade comes hell-awhoopin' from the north. He hit us all spraddled out an' stampeded us back on the Diamond S which was beddin' down fer the night, right peaceable. We didn't only have time tuh warn the rannies there an' make a sort uh stand-off tuh let 'em grab their guns, before Shade's army lit right on our necks!

"Man, it was awful!" shuddered Clint. "They scattered us so far we ain't been able tuh get together fer three days!"

"Yuh figurin' them that's left is the ones that done all the firin' this afternoon?" asked Charley.

"Couldn't be no one else."

"They done cashed in—"

"Not *all* uh them," cut in Clint decidedly. "Some uh that bunch takes plenty killin' tuh stay dead!"

"Then we find 'em, pronto!"

"Tomorrow may be too late an' we can't ride tonight."

"Why not?"

"Couldn't find 'em. Anyhow—Jim done had a bad fall. He can't sit his bronc fer hard ridin'."

"Tomas kin find 'em an' we kin leave the kid here."

"None whatever! I'm stayin' with the kid, he can't do nothin' if anyone ketches him."

"That's right," snorted Blaze. "An' if he runs he's liable to get lost."

"Look here, Clint," burst in Charley decidedly. "Yuh said yoreself that tomorrow might be too late. Even if yuh kin stomach runnin' out on yore pards—we don't! We need them fightin' buckaroos tuh lick Slade! Tomas is slick enough tuh get close enough tuh talk tuh 'em but they'd cut down on any strangers. You gotta come along! If yore still worried about yore kid brother we'll leave Blaze here tuh wet-nurse him."

"Not Blaze!" snapped Clint. "You stay, Burwash. Let us young rannies ride."

"I ain't so old but what I can't hold up alongside any young whippersnapper," growled Charley resentfully. "I don't savvy this section near as good as Blaze. What the hell is the difference who stays anyway how? This ain't no time tuh pick an' choose. Yo're as finicky as a cow bawlin' fer its lost calf. If yuh don't like our plans, jest haul yore tail outta here—you, an' yore brother!"

This was talk stronger than Clint Tenny usually endured. His objections were smothered in a flare of wroth.

"Gimme my gun! After this is all settled I'll make a coupie uh you loud-talkin' hombres whisper. Let's ride!"

Blaze did not like the arrangements any better than did Clint, but he offered no objection. Somebody had to take care of that pesky kid who, somehow, seemed to be the cause of all discord among the others. His mood was surly as he pulled his blanket roll from his horse after the others had left.

"We might as well bed down," he told the boy. "They got a tough job and likely won't be back before dawn. Hey! What are you huntin' for?"

The youngster had been lighting matches and was climbing up the canyon wall to a rock outcrop which formed the roof of their shelter. For the first time he spoke, in a muffled, tremulous tenor.

"I don't want to sleep down there. It's—it's dangerous if—if—somebody—should find us!"

"Hell! I'm down here with two guns! I don't snore loud, either, so I wouldn't disturb your sleep any. Anyhow, our broncs need watchin' and I'm stayin' here."

As he flung down his blankets, Blaze thought he heard a relieved

sigh from above. Before he fell asleep he decided that the sooner they shipped that cowardly kid to safer country the better it would be for all concerned.

He was awake again before dawn, instinct warning him of something not just right. Yet, when he stumbled over the rocks to the mouth of the canyon, he heard nothing. He waited watchfully until past sunrise, scanned each direction carefully without seeing movement of any kind.

He was turning back into the canyon when firing broke out. It was distinct enough as it crashed through that echoing cut, but it was impossible to make an accurate estimate of distance or direction. Blaze listened sharply and made a guess.

"It took Tomas longer'n he figured to reach those rannies and lead 'em clear," he decided. "They were seen by one bunch of Shade's guards and maybe they're shootin' their way through. It won't be long before this neighborhood is crawlin' with Shade's lice. Me, I'd better pull in my neck!"

Near his hideout he snifled the air with approval. The tang of coffee floated there with welcome invitation.

"The kid's got some savvy anyhow," he thought. Aloud, he called, "Keep it hot. I'm goin' up to look after the broncs."

The boy's big hat popped over the edge of the shelf above.

"What's that shooting about?"

"Most likely your big brother and his friends playin' tag with Shade Sloan. Don't let it spoil your appetite."

The kid's large, dark eyes followed Blaze Brill's competent figure up the canyon worriedly.

"Don't be gone long," he pleaded.

Blaze growled in irritation but he was back soon. He climbed up until he could see over the shelf.

"Good place," he commented, eyes busy.

He dropped down again and carefully covered all sign of fire and human occupancy below, glanced up the canyon to be sure the horses were out of sight and then tossed blanket roll and equipment to the ledge. He had no conscious motive in doing this, it was a fighting man's natural precaution in enemy territory.

The boy had eaten breakfast, leaving a generous portion for his companion. The kid watched Blaze while he ate and Blaze watched the canyon mouth. He was fumbling for tobacco and papers when his hand sped for the nearby rifle. His stomach hit the rock about the same time his Stetson did. Bareheaded, he stared sharply while, behind him, the boy crouched and held his breath.

Two men were advancing cautiously up the canyon. Further beyond, four horsemen eyed their progress alertly.

"See anything, Joe?" called one.

Joe halted and turned.

"Naw. Bring up them broncs an' we'll ride in a piece. Couldn't be nobody in here, hardly, this early. But them rannies oughtta be here soon. We wait fer 'em tuh ride by."

Blaze swore acridly in a rumbling whisper. He had hidden the horses carefully some distance up at a spring but they were sure to whinny a welcome if those riders came close. It was evident that the six intended to wait in the canyon until "they" rode by. If "they" meant Tomas and his party, the canyon became a trap for all.

It appeared that the wily Mexican had won free. Well, Blaze would just lay low until he saw Tomas about to ride in, or until the six strangers started a determined search for the men who owned those hidden horses.

Now Blaze watched the first two men intently. The man named Joe had stopped suddenly, snifing vigorously.

"Fer Gawd's sake!" broke out his companion. "What the hell ails yuh? You gotta cold er somethin'?"

Then he, too, froze. Both stood like startled wild beasts, every sense keenly alert. Blaze could almost see their ears cock up and noses sharpen. The odor of coffee, which had been so welcome earlier, was now a traitor. Blaze moved to cover up the blackened pot but, instantly, the two men vanished behind convenient boulders.

"What's up, Joe?" rang the tense question from the now stationary horsemen.

Joe turned his head slowly and spoke softly.

"Somebody's been here—*or still is!*"

Blaze Brill's muscles were tight. By the tiniest of moves he swung his rifle and steadied it when he had the center of Joe's forehead notched.

Joe's eyes were glinting, snapping here and there as he minutely inspected every possible cover on the canyon floor. He wouldn't move another muscle, nor would the horsemen ride ahead until that inspection was complete. Hardly a full breath was drawn, least of all by Blaze.

Past the sights of his rifle he watched each jerk of Joe's eyes, praying that they would never lift above the canyon floor. But they did! And, in that instant, a hard slug, punching its way between them, shut them forever!

In the next instant, the remaining five men were throwing lead with heart-freezing speed over the shelf that supported Blaze and the boy. Only the fact that they had to angle their fire sharply upward prevented annihilation in that first volley.

During the hush which followed closely upon emptied magazines, the kid proved that he not only had quick wits but heroic blood. White-faced, trembling with fear, he crept near the edge farthest away

from Blaze, pushing ahead a rounded boulder. Upon this he tilted Blaze's discarded hat, moving it naturally.

The ruse worked perfectly.

A hail of lead screamed around the decoy hat. It gave the alert Blaze a diversion which enabled him to spew the entire contents of his magazine into the group near the canyon mouth. He made snap aim and with luck dropped a man, screaming.

The kid, foolishly, had jumped to his feet in excitement and emptied his gun blindly. From the return volley, one bullet slapped viciously at the slender left shoulder and flung the youth, whimpering, to the rock floor.

Blaze heard that but could spare no backward glance. The situation was too desperate. His next bullets spanged loudly on the boulders which hid the attackers' horses. He aimed not to kill the animals but to stampede them.

Cursing savagely, one man was dragged as he clung to the gathered reins. Two horses broke loose. That ended battle. A man afoot was as good as dead in that hostile country.

Dodging Blaze's bullets, fighting their crazed horses, the four men disappeared around the mouth of the canyon. Peace settled. Blaze watched intently until he was sure no further attack would be made. Then he turned to the wounded kid.

He saw that the boy had merely thrust a wadden bandanna under his his shirt and was pressing it against the wound.

"Let's have a look, kid," he said casually.

"I'm all right," muttered the boy, hunching away. "It's nothing, the bullet barely cut the skin."

"That's fine!" grinned Blaze. "But some cloth might be stickin' there, so we'll wash it out and tie it up neat."

"No!" screamed the youngster. "Don't touch me!"

"You damned nuisance" yelled Blaze. "I don't want that sore gettin' infected. Damn you—come here!"

He seized the kid in his sinewy arms, thrust his hand inside the shirt and ripped it open.

"Jumpin' Jerusalem!"

Blaze leaped backward, flipping his fingers as though they had been burned!

Indeed, that hard right hand, remembering the touch of soft rounded flesh, was uncomfortably warm. The heat flowed up his arms, spread beyond his neck and flared deeply red across his tanned face.

A panicky embarrassment flooded Blaze Brill. He stood like an awkward country lout, blushing and stammering.

"Hell! I mean—damn!—uh—I didn't know—shucks! I'm askin' your pardon right humble—ma'am"

Chapter 6

THAT morning, Shade Sloan had gathered every man on his pay-roll in headquarters. They stood in awkward groups, uncomfortable and expecting plenty Hell to be raised. Everything, they knew, had gone wrong and their chief was not a man to take that calmly.

Shade looked them over scornfully.

"I don t know why I keep payin' you bums" he grated. "First I send four of yuh intuh Salud tuh rub out jest one man, Blaze Brill and him sick in bed. He gets all four! Then five uh my best makes a try fer that same Brill while he's comin' through a narrow pass. Any kid could'a got him there but what happens? Blaze an' his two pards gives them five their last load uh lead! Now Blaze is here—an' nobody in this hull outfit kin find out where!

"I take the trouble tuh wreck every spread in Santa Inez valley but you damned fools lets some uh them fightin' rannies get free. They're runnin' loose an', if Blaze Brill ever hooks up with 'em, the fat's in the fire again! I don't aim tuh let that happen!

"No," continued Shade, letting the cold glare of his slate-eyes chill each man, "fill yore belts, oil yore guns an' load up plenty grub. We go out an' we don't come back until the hull job's done—an' done complete!"

"What's yore plan?" asked Tucson Tom when the room was cleared.

"Plan?" repeated Shade in surprise. "Clean up the hull valley. Quick!"

"What's the hurry?"

"Damn it, Tom!" burst out Shade impatiently, "use yore head! How much *dinero* has been comin' in lately?"

"Not much."

"Not much—Hell! There ain't been nothin' comin' in! You know what my pay-roll is costin' me—I can't stand expenses that big very long! I gotta clean up—quick!"

"I gotcha, Shade." Tom cocked his broad Stetson the better to scratch his black hair. "Are yuh figgurin' Blaze done joined up with them rannies from the ranches what's runnin' loose?"

"I'm hopin' he ain't! That's all the more reason fer wipin' out them homeless rannies before Blaze finds 'em. Let's get goin'."

Leading every man of his army—and army it was—Shade spread them throughout all of Santa Inez valley with military cunning. His wide-flung bands of horsemen combed every isolated hiding place and at last found the remnants of the Bar-shoe-bar and the Diamond S. These they drove into a corner, a corner from which, according to the wisest of Shade's henchmen, there was no escape short of surrender.

Shade Sloan blocked every avenue of escape. He detailed squads at every strategic point, threw out patrols which rode between them, linked up every chain with ready guns.

But, because it had taken him all that day until darkness before he could silence those defiant rifles, Shade was sure he had hemmed in Blaze Brill, Charley Burwash and Tomas de Miramon with the rest.

"Now, wipe 'em out!" commanded Slade, locking his teeth over each word confidently. Yet, his confidence was misplaced; Blaze, Charley and Tomas were not in the trap!

"Camp right where yuh are until mornin'," was Shade's order. "A hull night, added tuh a day without eatin' or drinkin', will take a lotta fight outta them salty rannies. You rannies get yore rest in shifts. I'll skin any hombre that falls asleep on guard!"

Stern orders and complete—except that they did not take into account a Mexican who had spent his boyhood days in that territory. Tomas de Miramon called this a well-remembered playground. He knew all the hiding places. He could play at "hide-and-seek" though he knew the penalty for losing was death.

Tomas de Miramon had undertaken a terrific task when he attempted to lead a rescue party of three—one of them reluctant.

For the first time in his life, Clint Tenny had ridden to the relief of friends unwillingly. His will was badly strained in stretching to cover two widely separated loves. Of the dangers he faced he believed the one he was leaving behind to be the worst.

Only he knew a woman remained back there with Blaze Brill!

Blaze Brill! A young, virile, red-blooded man!

Could the girl keep the secret of her sex? If not—? Just those two alone during the night! Clint clicked his teeth savagely at the thought—hot irons of unreasoning jealousy searing his brain.

Now he wished that he had boldly declared the girl was "his," thus making the primitive man's challenge that he who "touched" must be daring, skillful and powerful enough to do so over his lifeless body. At first it seemed the best way to remove temptation by passing off the girl as his brother, but he had counted on his own presence to help with the deception. Now circumstances forced him to ride to the help of friends, something he could not avoid without loss of respect as a man.

"But if I find Blaze done as much as lay one paw on her," Clint raged inwardly, "I'll kill him! Not with jest one nice, clean bullet but by tearin' him up—slow!—into raw, bleedin' hunks!"

So he tortured himself with caveman thought until he rode into common danger with his partners.

Tomas de Miramon must now find a gap in the battle lines, lead Charley and Clint through it, locate the position of Clint's friends, reach them without an alarm—and reverse the process.

Perhaps no man but the Mexican, born and raised in that wild country, could have done it.

The horses were carefully tied up in a secluded canyon. Each man looped his saddle rope over a shoulder. Spurs and other clink-producing objects were left behind. The three cautiously scouted the situation and chose the best point of attack.

Shade, expecting no enemy from outside his lines, had permitted fires around which blanketed figures of the man off guard lay warmly. Tomas spotted those fires on a mental map and compared them with his knowledge of the main features of the country. Somewhere near the center of that ring must be a high, easily defended nook, not capable of easy approach by enemies. There must huddle what was left of Clint's friends, worn and wide-eyed.

Tomas nodded in satifaction—he knew that place!

He moved to a point furthest from the nearest fire, then headed in, every sense strained to keen alertness. His companions crept after him, silent as stalking pumas. Partly up the slope of rising ground, Tomas halted and whispered to Charley.

"*Amigo,* you stay 'ere, no? W'en I breeng zose udder hombres back, zey make noise, maybe, an' you mus' tell eef Shade 'ave wake up. *Adios, amigo.* We go now."

"I like that arrangement," agreed Charley, "because I don't like walkin' an' my boots is tight. I'm squattin' here right peaceable, but I don't nohow like the set-up. Suppose Shade's snakes does wake up? How in Hell can I let you know?"

"Eef I do not fin' 'ere w'en I come back, zen I know sometheeng 'ave 'appen. Maybe you shoot an' ron like Hell, no?"

"If I gotta shoot," growled Charley, "I don't run! But, get goin', Tomas, yuh got a full night's work ahead."

"*Si,*" agreed the Mexican soberly. "Señor Cleent, you come now."

An hour of climbing brought Tomas and Clint, panting and bruised, to the crest of the range. A short distance down the opposite slope Tomas knew that eroded rock strata had formed a ledge across the face of a cliff.

Tucked below it, and further in, was a smaller ledge, resembling the lower jaw of an opened mouth. On each side, like cheeks, the rock walls bulged out to block approach from both directions. Below the chin was a slope, the only apparent way to enter the opened mouth.

Clint flung himself face-down on the cliff's edge, pressing his hand against a side that ached with heavy breathing. He stared down into the silent blackness and asked:

"Yuh think my pards is still down there?"

"Señor, zey *mus'* be een those place—else dead!"

Clint strained eyes and ears.

"I don't hear nothin'," he muttered uneasily. "But, even if them rannies is still there, how kin we get 'em up here?"

It was then that Tomas de Miramon explained, in his halting English, of a similar predicament in which his wits had been driven to desperate thought. He had found a way out, truly one which only desperate men could use. Around one of the bulging cheeks of the open mouth below it was possible to edge by means of inch-wide foot-holds, scramble along a mere wrinkle in the rock and then make a perilous climb to the over-hanging ledge.

Tomas and Clint now stood on that ledge, about on the upper lip of the opened mouth. The problems were, first: to establish communication with the men below without an alarm, second: to guide them out and, last: somehow to help the hurt, since only able-bodied men could manage the dangerous route of escape.

"This is one Hell of a mess!" groaned Clint in dismay. "I got no pencil an' no paper tuh use it on. I can't yell down at 'em, cause anything I said could be heard by Shade. Damn!"

"W'at we do now, señor?" asked Tomas, equally helpless.

"I dunno. If it could be settled by shootin', I could easy find a way." Clint's deft hand already held a willing pistol. "Wait! I think, mebbe, I got it!"

On that six-gun Clint had laboriously carved his initials. Many of his bunk-mates on the Bar-shoe-bar had leaned over his shoulder while he worked, offering humorous comment on the workmanship. If any of those friends were still alive down below, they would recognize it immediately.

Clint tied the gun to the end of his lariat. With a full-armed swing he cast it over the lip of the ledge, where it swung back and forth in great arcs.

A vicious tug announced that somebody had clinched with the unknown danger which had dropped from above. Clint hung on grimly.

A few minutes later gentle yanks, evenly spaced, set him hauling back hand over hand. His gun came over the lip wrapped in a soiled neckerchief. Carefully shielding lighted matches, he and Tomas unrolled the gun and found words scratched on the wooden grip with a knife point.

"Deel the cards, Clint," it read.

"Señor, you do not know those way. I mus' go," declared Tomas. "You tell zem I come, no?"

"Shore, I can't make it nohow," agreed Clint, and scratched further words on the gun-butt.

"A mex frend comin'. Clint."

Even with that news gone ahead, Tomas was greeted with six-guns boring into his sides. Nerves were raw in the den below.

"Mex, speak yore piece! Who sent yuh down?"

"Señores!" gasped the Mexican. "Eet was the Senor Cleent!"

"Yeah? What does this Clint look like?"

Seven fighting men stood there, all with slight wounds but, still, fighting men.

A fighting man himself, Tomas recognized danger.

He talked fast, mixing English and Spanish in his earnestness but his speech thereby becoming more convincing. One man, who had been studying Tomas closely, settled all doubt.

"I know this Mex now. His fambly's ole-timers around this section. Even if Shade caught Clint an' made him write them words on his gun, like we suspicioned afore, this rannie wouldn't be sent in alone. He hate's Shade's guts!"

"*Si.* Eet ees so, señor!" His black eyes were glittering.

"Let 'im take me up alone," ordered the man. "If anything is wrong I'll shore as Hell let out a yell—no matter what!"

"We all goes. But what about them?"

"Zose we mus' leave," the Mexican pointed to four who were decently arranged, faces covered. He seized a pile of lariats nearby. "Weeth thees rope we pull up zose what cannot follow."

Later, seven sweating men thankfully felt the helping grip of Clint's hand above. They rested briefly. Then set earnestly to the task of hauling up the helpless two they had left behind.

This was accomplished, eventually, by means of rope slings and brute strength. But the ordeal exhausted the two men who were already weakened by bad wounds. In addition, the unavoidable scraping and scratching of the job had been heard by Shade's guards. Although they did no firing, the word of warning was passed up and down the lines and every man was awake and fully ready.

Keeping his lone vigil, Charley Burwash had seen figures stride among those sleeping around the fires, shaking all to wakefulness. In a few minutes the atmosphere was tense.

Charley did some serious thinking then. He estimated that Tomas had been gone between three and four hours, which would put the present time close to dawn. With only a short period of darkness remaining, and hampered by the inevitable wounded, Tomas would soon be in trouble.

Charley jumped to his feet, thinking out loud.

"Hell! Those rannies up there shore ain't bringin' no broncs along. And they can't get no place unless they do. Me, I gotta rustle some broncs. Where? Well, Shade's outfit didn't walk here. Mebbe that bunch down there is so interest in lookin' ahead that they won't notice nothin' behind."

He drifted down the slope and circled widely, only the faint rustle of his clothes marking his passage. He headed for the most distant fire and scouted behind it until he found a dark mass which was that

particular outpost's horses. Charley lowered his rifle gently to the ground and fumbled about for a handful of small stones. These he threw with all the force of his arm. One after the other the hard missiles pelted among dozing horses until the snorting, plunging uproar brought men on a cursing run.

Charley left hurriedly. Until the cause of that commotion had been thoroughly investigated, all of Shade's men near there would have their attention divided. Charley was now ready for his most daring venture, that of stealing horses!

But his task proved easy, too easy.

"I dunno what this means," muttered Charley doubtfully. "Shade ain't usual careless like this."

He stopped to do more thinking.

"Hell, I got it! He took all day tuh drive them rannies intuh a pocket where he figgurs they can't get out, nohow. He's already killed some. The rest is worn out, hungry an' certain damn thirsty! Mebbe he thinks he's got me'n Blaze an' Tomas herded up there, too.

"Havin' caught all the broncs he knows damn well we wouldn't make no break tuh get free—not without leavin' no wounded behind!"

Charley moved ahead once more, hunting horses.

"No, Shade couldn't expect us tuh move without no broncs. He's concentratin' on what's inside his net. But he ain't got *all* uh us inside! That's where he makes his big mistake!"

When Tomas led his small band of weary ones down to the place where he had left Charley, Shade's patrol at this point, already warned of unusual activity, heard the noise of their coming. Tomas halted, puzzled by the absence of the reliable Charley, knowing that nothing could have moved him except extreme emergency.

"Señores, we mus' fight!" warned the Mexican.

The whisper of steel leaving leather answered him. Unnoticed in the darkness, one man dropped to his knees in utter inability to keep his feet. During the following excitement he was forgotten, left behind. Had he called, some comrade would have turned back to die beside him, but this man knew he could not survive his wounds and the exertion to come. So silent, he flattened into black shadows, arranging rifle, six-gun and cartridges conveniently before him.

Now the long-drawn, bellowing roar of Charley Burwash boomed through the late night.

"Tom-a-a-as! Tom-a-a-as! Head fer our bron-n-cs!"

Instantly Tomas leaped down the slope, the others clustered close behind. For a time they ran, until Shade's men converged upon the crashing charge. Then the storm broke!

Charley scattered the first masses of Shade's men. He had their backs strongly outlined against the glare of camp fires. His rifle stuttered in its haste to fling bullets whole those splendid targets remained.

Wasting no second of the resulting confusion, the Mexican's party raced onward until Shade's fighters, crouched behind cover, had solved the mystery of surprising moves. Then they struck vigorously.

But the fugitives had nearly reached the canyon where the horses of Tomas and Charley had been tied. From the darkness on one flank came the cautious call of Charley.

"Tomas! This way! I have rustled us some broncs!"

The Mexican forgot his surprise at this news in more pressing business. Shade's outfit was closing in fast, tightening a wide loop. Bullets were criss-crossing, finding flesh even in the dark. The horses were "spooky," white-eyed with nervousness. It was high time to leave—provided some road was still clear.

Then came opportunity!

Far in the rear a furious tatoo of gunfire broke out. Some man's voice shrilled curses and taunts. Puzzled, the fighters hushed their guns. Then a man near the camp fire yelled.

"Somebody stole our broncs!"

Those two divesions were enough for the canny Mexican. Snapping orders, he was on a horse, leading away toward some place dim in the coming dawn. Pursuit was delayed long enough to permit a safe lead —safe enough until the risen sun exposed their trail to keen-eyed trackers. Then Shade's wolves would resume the hunt for man-meat. Separate packs would be thrown out widely to block any rabbitlike doubling back.

With the daylight Tomas slackened speed, taking time to scan the route ahead. His party, relaxing somewhat, found time to review the details of their escape and check up on the cost. Fresh wounds flowed bright red, darker blood was oozing from older bandages. One man, staring sharply at his companions, questioned urgently:

"Where's Brazos Bill an' Chuck Callaghan?"

"Brazos took lead clean through his heart," reported a weary voice. "I ain't seen Chuck since we left that stand-off."

Nobody else had, either. Comparing notes, Clint Tenny burst out suddenly:

"By Gawd! That was Church who raised that ruckus jest before we lit out! He was bad hurt an' figured he couldn't make it. So he drops out an 'gives us our chance fer a getaway!"

As one man the group reined in. Hard eyes glinted along the back trail in desperate calculation, softer eyes swung forward again. Charley Burwash spoke the opinion of all.

"If he was bad hurt, he couldn't hold out no longer than his ca'tridges —an' he was spendin' them right fast. He made his play an' mebbe he wouldn't like it none if we spoiled the deal on him. He could have all my chips but he done raked in the pot already. We can't do nothin' about it."

"Yeah an' if we don't rattle our hocks outta here," added a tired rider, "Chuck Callaghan done died fer nothin'."

Sensible comment. They could pay the dead hero no greater honor than making the best of his sacrifice. The living must go on.

Toward this end, Tomas spurred ahead. On an indirect course he was leading back to Blaze Brill and "Jim."

The drumming pound of their horses was louder than the muffled firing coming from the canyon miles away where Blaze was at that moment beating off one of Shade's patrols. When his friends had ridden near enough to have heard the battle Blaze had already won the first skirmish and was lying in watchful silence.

Outside of the canyon mouth, three of his attackers crouched behind barricades. They didn't know who they had trapped but they intended to hold their prey while the fourth man galloped back to report to Shade. That man saw Tomas and his party. He saw, also, that they halted for a time to stare along the back trail and then leap into flight, changing their original course sharply to the south. Far behind, riders raced in pursuit. Those last men could only be Shade's army.

Now the fourth man spun about and returned to his comrades outside of Blaze's canyon.

"Hit leather!" he called. "Shade's after the bunch he wants."

"What about these rannies we got holed up here?"

"Can't be more'n two in there—leave 'em be. This other scrap is a heap more important."

The four galloped off, leaving Blaze and the girl unharmed.

When Tomas swung off his previous route, his action brought an angry protest from Clint Tenny.

'We're runnin' away from our pards! We ain't leavin' them two alone! None whatever!"

"Señor, we mus' ron for place w'ere we fin' water an' chance for rest. Eef we ride to Blaze to show Shade w'ere to look—an' we all die een beeg fight. No. We go sout' w'ere only three hombres stan'-off Shade w'ile udders sleep. We fin Blaze *mañana.*"

"Tomorrow! Them two'll be alone fer one more night!"

"*Si,*" answered Tomas. "Shade weel follow us. Better so."

Yet the Mexican wondered why his excellent plan did not win full approval. More so, when his party was safely sheltered by a narrow crack in the mountains that could be defended by three men against Shade Sloan's army. Here the utterly exhausted friends of Clint dropped in their tracks and were instantly asleep.

Tomas and Charley stared in huge contentment down at all of Shade's raging mob below. But Clint fidgeted restlessly as a caged tiger and repeated:

"They'll be alone fer one more night!"

Chapter 7

For a long time, wordlessly, the girl stared back at Blaze Brill. Emotions, no two alike, swept her in succession. Defiance trod closely on the heels of fear then, as the man made no move, she remembered his words of apology. She wanted to answer them properly but, strangely, found herself unable to speak.

Then came womanly curiosity. What would he do now—now that he *knew?* Her anticipation of his action blew hot and cold—dreading—hoping—frightened—daring!

Always a man of instant reactions, Blaze was annoyed by this unaccustomed paralysis. A crazy idea repeated itself over and over, "If she had only stayed a man I could've handled her—him—easy."

But her sex was an unescapable fact. Blaze's observant blue eyes swept across those oversized clothes, seeing now the curves that had been concealed by shapelessness.

Under that inspection the girl crumpled her torn shirt into a knot beneath a small, clenched hand. Her mood was crystal clear—anger. Even Blaze, novice with women, noted that. But, Hell, he couldn't help looking at her—you had to look at people when they were around you. Who did she think she was anyhow? With that thought his eyes became steely. His voice had a brutal ring.

"So you're Clint Tenny's—*brother!*"

His accent on the word was a scathing indictment. The girl flinched as though struck. She did, indeed, strike back, a smacking slap that set his left ear ringing. Too late she knew her mistake. These hard, fighting Westerners reacted to physical violence instinctively. Swift as a rattler's jab, Blaze had her!

His muscles were steel-taut, as though a man were really inside those man's clothes. Not finding hard male muscles in his grip he almost let go—almost! Why, this body was soft, warm, desirable! With the speed of a wild thing, his surging combative blood reversed its goal.

A hundred generations ago Blaze Brill's ancestors had seized their women. This day Blaze Brill took his! The girl struggled futilely in his clutch. She spat out, in strangled gasps:

"Clint—will—kill—you—for—this!"

Again a mistake!

The threat merely piled flame on a seething volcano. Blaze threw back his head and a roar rasped his throat like that of a mating lion in the jungle. Fiercely, he thrust the hard stubble of his unshaven lips against the smooth, moist redness of hers.

Frightened beyond the worst of past experiences, the girl still summoned a last, desperate defense. Grimly holding to consciousness, she

suddenly relaxed every muscle and hung draped across his tough arms. Long, dark lashes sagged loosely to hide eyes alive with wariness.

Shocked into his cleaner nature, Blaze gaped in horror at the limp bundle. This, the awful thing he had done, had him whipped. Panic-stricken, he gently lowered the girl's body to the ground. Leaped for his canteen. Spilled water with trembling hands on his neckkerchief. Clumsily sopped it across the delicate features. Rubbed her wrists. While he worked he talked to himself in a furious monotone.

"Damn your black, filthy soul, Blaze Brill! You're not fit to live! She said Clint'd kill you. Well, if he wants to dirty a clean bullet thataway I'm not raising a hand to stop him! Any woman's got a right to pick her man, willing and unhampered. It don't nohow excuse my actions. Even if she is Clint's woman—"

The girl's body jerked. Blaze jumped erect and stood watching, nervously, the flashing light in her large, dark eyes. With surprising strength she was on her feet, smoothing her rumpled clothing, mopping the dripping water from her face.

An old-time expression came to Blaze's mind.

"Madder'n a hen caught in a rainstorm," he thought.

"Well," she snapped, "haven't you something to say to me?"

Blaze stiffened.

"Saying I'm sorry doesn't clean the dirt off of spilled beans, ma'am," he muttered.

He caught up his rifle and lowered himself from the shelf.

"I'm going down to tend to something I forgot -those rannies that shot us up," he flung over his shoulder. "If it'll relieve your feelings some, shove a bullet through my back! Or maybe Clint'd get a heap more fun out of doing that!"

The girl watched his broad back bobbing down the canyon. If she had not heard every word of his self-condemnation during her "fainting spell" his apparent callousness would have infuriated her. He believed her to be Clint's "woman"—fair prey for any man strong enough to down Clint. But, though he was ashamed of his methods, he was asking for no mercy. He would "take his medicine" without a whimper. Savage brute he might be—but also a man.

He was coming back now, face serious.

"I'll be relieving you of my company for a spell," he informed. "We've been lucky. Those four outside left right sudden. I'm scouting to find out why."

"How long will you be gone?" she asked anxiously.

"Anyhow an hour, I reckon. Just keep out of sight and you'll be safe enough. So long."

"So long," she answered doubtfully. She would have felt safer with him near, in spite of his barbarous instincts.

Blaze rode out of the canyon somewhat troubled. The distant firing he had heard early in the morning was proof enough that his friends had run into danger. But, unless they had been wiped out completely, somebody should have returned by this time.

He spurred along rapidly, not worried by possible ambush since the four men who had attacked him had left at a headlong run. Their trail was plain. Blaze found the point where they had swung sharply to the south, sighted along their route and lifted his eyes to a distant range of hills. A notch against the skyline indicated a pass or narrow canyon.

Now cautious, Blaze chose a covered approach and rode until he was close enough to overlook operations. He saw movement of men and horses, heard occasional rifles. Enough to give him a good idea of the situation. Beyond question, Tomas and his party were in that crevice, not in desperate trouble but still unable to move freely. No chance of them trying to join Blaze before night and, perhaps, not even then.

The effort would mean a long detour to the east, striking south through some easier pass, back west again—always with the risk of attack by Shade or of leading his horde to the hiding place of Blaze and the girl.

But Blaze could not wait. Some of Shade's men knew where he had hidden. Blaze must move that night, trusting to his rather hazy knowledge of the country to locate that pass in the dark. It was a difficult venture but it must be tried.

He paused to fix landmarks in his mind. He was in the southwest corner of Santa Inez valley, in the bad-lands south of the old limits of the Diamond S range. Here the Dos Amigos mountains left their general north-and-south tendency and curved abruptly east to drop down, some six or seven miles beyond, steeply into Rustler Pass. He felt sure he could remember the main features.

An hour later he was explaining this to the girl.

"Best get some sleep this afternoon," he advised. "You'll have a hard ride of it with that sore ankle and hurt shoulder. Hit the blankets while I tend to our broncs."

But when he returned the girl was sitting up, wide-eyed.

"Look here, ma'am," he began, utterly misreading the cause of her wakefulness, "I did my worst a couple hours ago. I'm giving my word it won't happen again—"

"Sit down, Blaze," she ordered. "Whether I like it or not, I'll have to stay with you for a night or two. You're entitled to a 'show-down' and an explanation—"

"I'm not prying into your reasons, ma'am."

"But I want you to hear them," she insisted. "I'm not Clint Tenny's—'woman'—"

"I haven't said so!" hastily.

"No, but you think so. You're wrong!"

"Then what've you been running around with Clint for—dressed in those clothes—three whole nights!" rasped Blaze.

"When Clint told you about the Diamond S raid he left something out—for my sake. I'm Margaret Stark."

"Ed's daughter!" exclaimed Blaze. His thoughts raced back to the time he had found her father, dead, and Charley Burwash had started a search for the daughter, better dead than captured by Shade Sloan.

"I didn't even know Ed Stark had a daughter, until Charley Burwash told me recently."

"That's not surprising," informed the girl. "You only visited our ranch once and then poor Dad—suspicious of everybody—ran you off. But I saw you, I was only a few feet away. I heard everything. So I knew your name and—well, never mind, it doesn't matter now."

"What doesn't?"

Margaret Stark looked at Blaze and again he saw the queer light in her eyes which he had noticed over the camp fire when he had been "sizing up the scared kid." No more now than then could he interpret its meaning. Women, he admitted uneasily, acted in a way no man could understand, at least, in a way Blaze Brill found puzzling.

"When Shade's outfit drove the Bar-shoe-bar back into our ranch," informed Margaret, "I was in bed. Clint Tenny found me—in my—my nightgown—outside in the garden—where I had run when the house was burned. He risked his life getting back into the bunkhouse for some men's clothes. He was fighting desperately while I dressed, caught up a horse and rode free!"

"So that's why we didn't find your body—like Charley Burwash was hoping—"

"Hoping?"

"Yeah," muttered Blaze. "He said he'd sooner see your dead body than—than know that Shade Sloan got it!"

"When—and if—Shade Sloan gets my body, I'll know what to do about it!" stated Margaret Stark definitely.

"Sure, sure!" agreed Blaze hurriedly. "But I don't intend to let that happen. No more than Clint Tenny did that night."

"That night, he found the way to get us away!" stated Margaret. "We were the last two and that's why we missed the others. He looked after me for three whole days—and nights—like a man—and a gentleman."

Blaze reddened painfully.

"And I played skunk! Well, when you see your gallant protector again, tell him what I did—"

"I don't intend to. Clint might have done the same, not knowing me and thinking that I was—was—"

"Was mine!" shouted Blaze. "And I would have filled him with lead —ripped him wide open—Hell! What's got into me? I haven't been right in my head lately. What's got into me?"

Blaze Brill was troubled by an age-old affliction, one which a woman understood readily. Though Margaret Stark said nothing, she knew now what Blaze Brill might not discover for a long time—that he was in love with her. That knowledge she tucked away in the deepest corner of her heart, to be carefully kept until called for properly.

"Get down where you belong, Blaze," she ordered confidently. "I'm ready to sleep, now."

"Sure, I'll retire to the lower parlor," Blaze grinned boyishly. "I'm feeling a heap more restful myself. This calm-after-the-storm business is right soothing."

The girl studied him shrewdly.

"Blaze, we haven't finished our peace talk according to the established custom. Shake on it."

"Right happy, ma'am."

"Since we're friends now, I'm known as Marge."

"Uh? I'm downright delighted. Rest easy, Marge."

He dropped out of sight, once more his natural self. Above, the girl sighed in relief. She need fear Blaze Brill no longer. And because her mind was easy, she slept soundly through the late afternoon and into early evening. She awoke, fully rested, with the odor of frying food curling over the lip of the rock shelf.

"I was about fixing to give you up for dead," grinned Blaze. "We'll light out as soon as we eat."

"Why, Blaze," laughed the girl, "you've shaved!"

"Yeah, seeing I was expecting lady company for dinner. It wouldn't do you any harm to pretty up yourself. I left a chunk of laundry soap on top of my war bag at the spring. It isn't perfumed any but it sure cuts into trail dust."

"Soap!" she cried in delight. "I haven't seen a piece, perfumed or otherwise, for too long. Keep the food hot."

"Take your time, Marge. Hey, soak that sore ankle good and let plenty lather dry on it. That'll keep your stocking from chafing too much. And Marge! Give that bullet crease in your shoulder a good cleaning out and a fresh bandage."

"It's hardly worth the trouble. It's just a scratch."

"That don't make any difference. You tend to it!"

The girl moved away with a smiling agreement. His tactful courtesy and thoughtfulness brought a warm glow to her heart.

When she returned Blaze gaped in wonder. Somehow she had managed an amazing freshness. Even the rumpled, coarse male attire had been smoothed and adjusted until it suggested feminine daintiness.

"Gosh, Marge, you improved plenty! I'll bet if you had a lace dress

and a heap of pink ribbons you'd be a right good-looking girl. I'd admire to see you thataway."

"All my pretty things are burned," she answered wistfully. Her lip trembled and tears gathered. "Oh, Blaze! Everything's gone! My father, my home, everything! I'm living like a wild beast."

"Aw now, Marge, you can't let yourself go. Buck up. I'll have you safe along in my best silk shirt and take you to a dance some place."

"Of course you will and I want you to see me dressed—like a woman. Let's eat," she added bravely.

She was composed and cheerful again by the time the horses, saddled and packed, stood ready for the night's journey.

Blaze rode ahead, testing dangers of the night. He heard the distant rumble of hoofs and swivelled in his saddle.

"Marge!" he called tensely. "Hurry!"

She was beside him and the two, outside the canyon, hovered under cover of darkness.

"Riders headed this way," whispered Blaze. "It might be Clint and the gang, but—maybe not!"

Doubt was erased swiftly.

The incoming riders called no friendly greeting but spread across the canyon mouth silently.

Blaze waited for no further proof of hostility. At a walk, he and the girl moved south until they were far enough out of hearing to take up a swift pace.

"We're heading through dangerous country," warned Blaze. "We can't go fast because I've got to test every mile. With the stars to guide me, I could make a bee-line to where I'm sure Clint and the rest are holing up. But now I must dodge, back and forth, balancing mileage and direction. I'm hoping to meet friends, somewhere along the line—"

"You will," encouraged his companion.

"Perhaps Tomas fought his way out," argued Blaze. "Then he'd figure to join up with us. The north pass is blocked. So he'll try to meet us, by the rear, or southern, entrance."

But Shade Sloan, shrewd leader, had already blocked that. Shortly after dark he had called Tucson Tom.

"I ain't satisfied with this layout. We got 'em blocked tight here but how about the south end? I'm takin' half our men an' ridin' around."

He arrived at the south end just in time to surprise two scouts who were testing possible danger at that end.

"Drive 'em back!" roared Shade. "Let 'em know they ain't no way out—front or back!"

But those two scouts were not men to be driven—not without a fight, at any rate. Their rifles were hot—and empty—before they

climbed back, reluctantly, through a narrow, deep crack in the rocks, there to report to Tomas and Charley.

"You boys done right good!" approved Charley heartily. "But don't let it end now. Shade come over this side aimin' tuh keep us awake an' worried. Fine! Now you lads jest bang off yore guns every time yuh see somethin' move down there—or even if yuh don't see nothin'. Make plenty noise! Mebbe Shade don't want us tuh have no sleep—but I'll be damned if he gets any hisself!"

Shooting was maintained vigorously on both sides for more than an hour. Then, by weary consent, it faded into silence. But though a truce existed, alert guards in each party lay with ready fingers pressed against triggers.

Sometime later, Blaze and Marge rode into this tense situation. It was disarmingly quiet. Though they came in at a weary walk, the faint sounds of their approach had preceded them by minutes. Shade Sloan's outlaws, efficiently ready, awaited them.

Blaze's hands flicked for his guns but, before he had cleared leather, the smothering impact of many black bulks had swept him off his horse and jarred him to numbness against the rocky ground. Marge had time for only one strangled scream. Then both were disarmed and helpless prisoners.

They were dragged to a remote corner in the rocks where a bright fire threw heat against the chill of night.

"My Gawd!" rang the surprised exclamation. "A woman!"

In the scuffle Marge's big hat had been knocked off. Long brown curls spilled luxuriantly across her shoulders.

Blaze tightened, dreading what was to come.

He saw the hawk face of Shade Sloan lighten with interest—Shade who had a weakness for women! Yet, Shade's greeting was casual, a flip of hand to hat and a careless:

"Howdy, Marge."

"Hello, Shade."

Blaze gaped in astonishment.

"You two know each other?"

Shade grinned.

"Yeah, me'n her father had some business dealin's."

But when he looked again at Blaze his grin tightened.

"Blaze Brill," the words were spoken softly, much too softly. "I'm shore glad tuh see yuh—*this way!*"

Shade looked down at the blue denim clad thighs on which were strapped two holsters, empty.

Blaze slid tanned hands across their emptiness and knew, for the first time, what danger menaced him.

"I'm not doubtin' your words, none whatever!" His words, too, were pitched softly. "Your men took damn good care that I was harmless.

It's a heap safer than seein' me through gunsmoke! If I had those two Remingtons where they should be—and a couple good men backin' me up—you'd be talkin' a heap different!"

Surprisingly, Shade nodded, his hard eyes thoughtful.

"Yore gang done give me plenty Hell," he admitted frankly. "I'm amin' tuh settle it right pronto. Take a load off yore feet, Blaze. Jest don't make no foolish moves an' my men won't bother yuh none until we finish our talk—an' not then, if yuh listen tuh reason."

"It won't do any good, but wag your jaw—I've got plenty of time."

"Jest how long depends on you!" warned Shade, and his hawk face was frankly cruel. "I'm layin' my cards face up, an' yuh best throw yore hand in the discard! Here's the layout:

"I gotta get yore gang outta my way. I'm admittin' they put up one Hell of a fight an' took more time an' more of my men than I kin afford. But I got 'em now! They can't live no more'n two days at the most—"

"Two *weeks* might be closer!" jeered Blaze. "And those rannies like a heap of company when they cash in!"

Shade snapped his fingers impatiently.

"How many is left? They ain't a dozen—an' some is hurt. On this side alone I got twenty-one able-bodied fightin' men. Get on yore hind laigs an' count 'em. Go ahead!"

"I'm takin' your word."

"I left that many more on the other side," continued Shade. "Now, what chance has yore outfit got?"

"Whatever it is—they take it!" dictated Blaze. "Just a while ago you said they took along more than you could afford. So you can't afford to lose any more."

"Right!" agreed Shade. "That's where you come in."

"Me? I'm plumb helpless."

"Not if yuh throw in with me!"

Blaze Brill gasped in a deep breath. When he let it out again it was an explosive:

"I'll see you in Hell first, Shade Sloan! You rubbed out my pard, Pat Hurley! There's nothin' squares that except me fillin' your guts with lead!"

"Ain't much chance thataway," stated Shade calmly. "Yuh can't do nothin'—*dead!*"

Here, for the first time, Margaret Stark either moved or spoke. Then her arm went to Blaze involuntarily.

"You wouldn't murder him?" she gasped.

Shade Sloan made no reply to her. His eyes took a new expression as he saw Blaze Brill's tanned hand cover the girl's fluttering one. He rose leisurely with the air of a man whose course was clear. He left

them for a moment and when he returned extended a stubby pencil and a crinkled scrap of paper to Marge.

"Blaze bein' downright stubborn," he said seriously, "mebbe you'll do some life-savin', Marge. I want them hellions up there. Dead—if I gotta have 'em that way but better alive, an' ridin' with me. They gets an even split of all I get, an' that'll be more than any uh them lost. Double shares fer ranch owners, includin' Blaze. I calls that a fair deal.

"Now," continued Shade ominously, "you write a letter that'll plumb convince them rannies up there. Make it plenty strong! They all joins up with me—or else—"

He left the threat unvoiced but it was, none the less, terrorizing. Horrified, the girl seized pencil and paper, but Blaze swung toward her with a growling defiance.

"Don't do it!" he ordered. "No matter what reason you gave—those fightin' hellions up there wouldn't give in! Don't write—"

"You, Blaze!" snapped Shade grimly. "Stand away from that gal! You men run him out! If he balks or gives yuh any trouble beat down his ears. Get some sense, Blaze, I'm through foolin'!"

Blaze recognized that threat. Helpless, he allowed himself to be herded away while Marge hurried her pencil. It was a hectic, disjointed letter she wrote to the men who were trapped in a narrow crevice in the mountains. It read:

> "Clint Tenny and those with you:
>
> Blaze Brill and I have been captured by Shade Sloan. Shade offers to end this fighting if all of you join him on equal shares. Otherwise he swears to kill every man!
>
> It's hopeless! You are exhausted, wounded, trapped!
>
> I am in no danger—but Blaze and all of you are unless you give up! Shade says you must decide immediately! Otherwise Blazes' dies—first! Later all of you!
>
> Marge Stark."

Shade did not immediately deliver that letter. He read it with a thoughtful frown, then ordered the girl out of sight and hearing while he called Blaze to the fire.

While Blaze read the note the outlaw leader studied his face shrewdly, caught tiny, half-concealed expressions and analyzed them keenly. Blaze looked up, wooden-faced.

"Now why didn't Marge write tuh her old man?" asked Shade.

"Because you killed him" ripped out Blaze.

"Got him, huh? But wasn't they any Diamond S punchers left? This Tenny gent she names—seems like he was on the Bar-shoe-bar pay-roll. How come?"

Blaze Brill's lips were tight as drawn wires. Words hummed through them tensely:

"What's your guess, Sloan?"

Shade whistled softly and bent his head again over the message. Now he doubted that it would be worth while to deliver it at all. He needed only one "guess"—bad blood between Tenny and Brill over the girl.

When Tenny read that frantic plea for the lives of men and Blaze!—Blaze—Blaze! he would be quite likely to cheer about the news. Let Blaze die first! Clint would fight the more fiercely for his own life knowing that his rival had been removed.

Blaze Brill had some strong friends up there, too. That note would cause an argument, beyond any doubt. Clint's friends might be disposed to sacrifice Blaze but would the others consent? To a man they had proven themselves stern fighters, each willing to die if, by dying, the others could win. However, a difference of opinion among them would weaken their united will, perhaps split the gang.

Shade decided to send the note.

In the meantime he tested Blaze.

"That letter shore was a heart-renderin' appeal for yore friends tuh save yore life," he sneered. "They'll likely all bust out weepin' an' wailin'—especially Clint Tenny!"

Blaze's eyes froze but he ignored the taunt.

"My *friends,*" he countered, "know I'm not whinin' about this deal. They might do a heap of talkin' about it but, in the end, they'll tear up that damn paper an' make bullets out of it! Those wildcats will collect plenty scalps for my one!"

"But I still gotta card tuh play," declared Shade craftily. "You'll be outta my way an' I—still—got—Marge Stark!"

Watching the hot red blood fade from Blaze Brill's astonished face, Shade was sure he had played a trump card.

He did not doubt that Blaze, a tough fighting man, would die at the end of a rope or by gunfire with a defiant word but he could not meet death calmly knowing that Margaret Stark would be left destitute without him.

"Shade, you wouldn't dare make a play for Marge!" Blaze ground out icily. "Were you to lay a hand on her right now I'd kill you with my bare hands. Even if I had a slug plumb center in my heart I'd live long enough to do it!"

"Brave words!" sneered Sloan, but his hand crept toward his gun. "Would yuh like tuh try that last?"

"Even if I missed," insisted Blaze, "somebody would send you to Hell -where you belong. No decent man in this section would quit tryin' until he got you!"

"They been tryin' and I'm still livin'," boasted Shade. "I'm on top

uh the heap, right now! Marge ain't no fool. With you dead she'd string along with—"

"With you? Marge? You're loco!"

"What's wrong with me?" snarled Shade. "I never had no trouble gettin' any gal I wanted."

"Girls!" sneered Blaze. "Honky-tonks!"

"Women is all alike! Marge ain't no different—*hold it, you!*"

Shade's gun was out—just in time to halt Blaze's maddened rush.

"Take time tuh think," advised Shade carelessly, but still holding his gun on Blaze's unprotected middle.

Blaze loosened his clenched hands.

"I'm thinkin'," he admitted.

Back across recent events raced his thoughts. He remembered, vividly, the casual meeting between Marge and Shade. Sloan had admitted previous acquaintance—business dealings with her father. How much more? Then, Clint Tenny had been with her three whole days—and nights! The girl's glib explanation had seemed reasonable at that time. But (here Blaze's belief faltered) Charley Burwash, who knew more about Shade Sloan and his methods than any man alive, had actually hoped to find her dead body—rather than know Slade had captured her.

No piece of this jumbled puzzle fit anywhere.

Though Blaze Brill was wet with a cold sweat, he could not reach a conclusion which would comfort him. Suddenly savage, he gritted:

"Shade, speak your piece!"

"You ain't only tough but you're smart. No man in my outfit, includin' Tucson Tom, is near as good as you. If yuh stay alive I m aimin' tuh make yuh my right-hand man. Act sensible, Blaze. Come in with me. Then yuh can have Marge!"

"After you get through with her? Hell! That don't tempt me a bit! I'm never joinin' up with you, Sloan."

"Damn yuh!" roared Shade and there could no longer be any doubt about his evil intention. "Marge wrote a note tuh them hellions up there. Yuh said, yoreself, that they wouldn't give in. Well, fellah, that answer is due, now! Does it come through 'No!' like yuh expect, nothin' on God's green earth kin save yuh! You die! In five minutes!"

Almost as an echo, a man called:

"Shade! They give us an answer!"

"What was it?"

"'Go tuh Hell!'"

"An' that!" decided Shade ominously, "is jest where yore goin', Blaze Brill! Pronto!"

At this there was confusion and a deal of argument.

"What," Shade's voice cut through the clamor, "is all that yammerin' about?"

A gunman stalked into the fire-light.

"The gal," he explained, "is raisin' hell. She don't like the idea uh Blaze bein' rubbed out that quick."

"An' who," asked Sloan, very softly, "is givin' orders around here?"

"You!" answered the gunman, steadily. "But this here Blaze, now ain't we heard yuh yoreself say he was hell on wheels?"

"Yeah, I said that."

"Then, they ain't no rannie in the hull outfit don't figger exactly like the gal does! A right tough hombre has some rights in any man's outfit! We ain't questionin' yore orders none—but we do say he don't die like no hawse-thief! He gets the right tuh die like a man—not now—but at dawn!"

Shade drew a long, deep breath.

"There's no man livin' I'd sooner see dead—than Blaze Brill!"

"We all agrees on that. But—we got him!"

"An' we keep 'im!" snarled Shade. "Now, send in that gal."

It was then that Marge Stark moved her body between Shade Sloan and Blaze Brill.

"Is he," she asked of Shade, "through?"

"Not only through," he assured, "but, almost dead!"

"Then there's no hurry?" she asked softly.

"Not fer a couple hours," he grinned, "but, what's on yore mind?"

"These men standing around—they make me nervous."

"Wanta be alone? That's easy settled. You rannies move out! How about Blaze?"

"He doesn't matter!"

Shade's triumphant face edged around the girl's body.

"Hear that, Blaze? What'd I tell yuh?"

Blaze met his stare stonily, refusing answer.

But, seeing her turn with tender attention to Shade, his stoical silence snapped. All the anguish, the seething resentment, the heart-breaking disbelief that this girl was worse than a —honky-tonk—poured from his lips in a blistering tirade. He said things, in that moment of agony, which no woman, however evil, had ever heard from him. His words held a scalding heat which was almost physical, yet the girl shivered as if chilled.

"I'm cold!" she suddered. "My blankets—"

"Shore, baby, I'll have 'em brought—"

But her hand indicated Blaze.

"Just for—that—" she grated icily. "Make—*him*—do it!"

Shade glanced sharply at her white face. He had enjoyed watching the tough Blaze Brill writhe under a mental torture that was beyond his power to inflict. Now Shade's pitiless lips widened, he burst into guffaws of keen delight.

"By Gawd!" he approved brutally. "By Gawd, if it don't take a

woman tuh twist a knife after it's cut in right tuh the hilt! You, Tucson!" he roared. "Blaze wants tuh end his last hour right gallant—doin' chores fer a lady!"

"What the Hell's this?" demanded Tucson suspiciously, squinting against the fire. "What chores?"

"Makin' the lady's bed!"

Tucson hesitated. If ever he had seen a man's soul burned to a cold clinker, if ever he had looked into dead eyes, they belonged to Blaze Brill. Tucson was a hard, ruthless man but this sort of thing was a bit too strong for him.

"Look here, Shade—" he began but, surprisingly, Blaze gestured for silence.

"It's—straight!" he agreed evenly. "Where's—her—blanket roll?"

Tucson motioned beyond the fire-light, too amazed to talk.

Blaze was the calmest person there, calm as a blast-furnace which, having fiercely burned up all available fuel, was reduced to thin ashes and glazed slag. The thin ashes were all that was left of Marge Stark; the hard, glazed slag was the man, Blaze Brill.

He was more than ever a fighting man, now. Worse, a killer, thinking only of blowing lead through the warm bodies of his enemies. Thinking coldly, and thinking of Marge Stark's blanket roll!

Not twenty-four hours ago, humming happily to himself, he had made up that roll himself. Now, because he knew what was in it, he willingly agreed to make up Marge's bed—beside that of Shade Sloan!

Purposely, he moved like a beaten man, fumbled the piles of his and her blankets, which had been carelessly thrown into a corner of the rocks by Shade's men.

In that roll was a Colt six-gun—the same one she had thrown down on the night she and Clint Tenny had been ambushed by Blaze, Tomas and Charley!

When he headed back into the fire-light, woodenly, that Colt was concealed inside his waist-band but, though he longed to throw lead into Sloan's guts, it stayed there.

"You ain't opened it," declared Shade. "Spread it out right comfortable."

"I did that much!" stated Blaze distinctly. "But, if you expect me to play 'lady's maid'—I'm takin' it now!"

"It's—enough," breathed Marge. "Let him go!"

"Shore," agreed Shade, "until dawn! Tucson, yuh heard?"

"Yeah," nodded Tom. "I'll jest let a man ride herd on 'im until then."

But, when the time for action came just before dawn, Blaze chose his own man.

"You," he said to the man who had delivered Marge's note, "I'm takin' a little walk. Come along."

The man indicated looked him over deliberately and then, having discovered no weapons, smiled carelessly. He arose and pointed.

"It's over there, jest a couple steps in the dark. Move out. I'll be close behind yuh."

This was as Blaze had hoped. He stepped beyond the fire-light, turned swiftly and pushed a six-gun into the other's ribs with a thrust that forced a startled grunt.

"Havin' delivered that letter," stated Blaze distinctly, "you know how to get there an part of the way up! Lead me that far—and you live! Have you got any good reason for wantin' a slug through your guts?"

"None I kin think of, offhand," admitted the man. "That gun plumb convinces me. But, if Shade ever finds out what I done, I'd best hunt me safer country."

"That's your worry, not mine, fellah," warned Blaze callously. "You shove ahead!"

They were part way up the pass before a tense voice called:

"Who's there? Answer quick!"

As quickly, Blaze replied:

"Blaze Brill! Comin' up."

"Blaze! Come ahead!"

Blaze reached forward and smacked the steel barrel of his gun smartly against the skull of his conductor. The man crumpled. Yet he would awake and live as Blaze Brill had promised.

Chapter 8

MARGE'S note, delivered after much suspicious shouting back and forth, had caused much more than even Shade Sloan had anticipated. It had brought on a serious clash between Charley Burwash and Clint Tenny.

"Shade caught Marge!" was Clint's cry when he read it.

"Who the Hell is Marge?" demanded Charley. He seized the letter and recognized the handwriting instantly. The mysterious woman whose actions had puzzled Deputy Sheriff Buck Cleary in Salud was now again mixed up with the notorious Shade Sloan!

"Hey! She's writin' about Blaze!" yelled Charley. "How— my Gawd! Is she the 'kid brother' we left back there—the one yuh was passin' off—"

"Burwash!" the name snapped out like a bullet from Clint's lips. "If yuh say what yore thinkin'—drag out yore iron!"

Charley stared back levelly.

"We kin leave that iron-draggin' until later. How long you know that gal?"

"Long enough," was the answer. "What's it tuh you?"

"Plenty!" Burwash dug into a pocket and showed two sweated notes, the ones which had been turned over to him by Buck Cleary. "Jest read them over. Mebbe yuh recognize the handwritin'."

"Why—looks like Marge wrote 'em. I can't savvy this!"

"That makes two of us, then," returned Charley. "Now I'm gonna tell yuh somethin' yuh likely don't know."

He gave Clint a complete account of all that had happened in Salud. All about one "Mary Smith" now identified as Marge Stark. Her seeming knowledge of Sloan's intentions, the unsigned notes and her odd movements to save Blaze Brill's life.

"They ain't but one answer to this. She's one uh Shade's dames that fell deep in love with Blaze—"

"That ain't so!" denied Clint desperately. "She ain't been with Shade an' Blaze never knowed she was a gal."

"It didn't look thataway," agreed Charley. "An' in Salud Blaze swore right solemn he never knowed her. But I'm thinkin' they must'a knowed each other sometime. An' she wouldn't dast cross Shade the way she done unless she knowed him damn well, too!"

"You ain't tellin' me Marge an' the Diamond S was in cahoots with Shade, are yuh?"

"I dunno—"

"Yuh shore don't!" snapped Clint. "Why Shade Sloan done raided them—"

"After!" cut in Charley. "*After* Marge made her play in Salud! That cost Shade three of his gun-slicks! She run out right after that happened. That was more'n Shade would stand fer. So he burned out the Diamond S. Why didn't Marge come straight tuh Cleary instead uh callin' herself 'Mary Smith' an' writin' mysterious notes?

"Now she's writin' again, tryin' tuh make us all throw in with Shade an' usin' the excuse that Blaze will die! An' look here! She says she ain't in no danger. Hell! No woman's safe with a man like Shade—unless she's movin' along willin'—"

"Swallow that—quick!" was Clint's command.

"I'm right anxious tuh do that,' agreed Charley coldly, "when I been proved wrong. Suppose yuh explain all uh this, step by step, right reasonable."

"I—can't," faltered Clint. Yet his body stiffened stubbornly. "But no matter how bad it looks I ain't believin' nothin' wrong about Marge until she admits it—an' not even then!"

Charley Burwash studied the distressed young man and an admiring light glowed in his eyes.

"Damn if I wouldn't like tuh call yuh 'friend,' Clint Tenny," he said softly. "But, right now, I'm worryin' about a friend uh mine—Blaze Brill. I don't know nothin' except what the gal writes—that he dies right sudden unless we all joins Shade Sloan. It looks like some trick.

But, even if it ain't, how many uh this bunch is ready tuh quit?"

"Not none!" was the instant reply. "Every rannie left has seen some pard bleedin' tuh death through holes that was punched in 'em by that murderin' skunk's bullets!"

"Then we leaves Blaze an' Marge alone—with Shade?"

Clint Tenny drew a long, painful breath.

"Aw Hell, Charley!" he exploded helplessly. "Blaze wouldn't want us tuh give in but, if he dies, I can't believe Marge wouldn't be in no danger. My Gawd! Ain't there no other way?"

"We could—all of us—light right in the middle of Shade's gang—unexpected! The last man—kills Marge—before he dies!"

Clint's eyes expanded, horror-stricken. He stood frozen in body while his brain burned.

"A true Western gal, right an' regular, would be willin' tuh die under them conditions, wouldn't she?" asked Charley softly.

"Yeah," the admission came from white lips. "Only—if I was that last man—I couldn't—nohow—kill her."

"We change it so that the first man seein' her throws her a extry gun," was the alternative. "Then she acts accordin' tuh her own mind."

Clint nodded, unable to form words in his dry mouth.

Charley stalked into the center of a wondering group of tough Westerners. Without visible emotion he explained the situation to all of those who had not overheard. He allowed a minute of absolute silence, then went on:

"We give Shade the right answer, accordin' tuh the way Blaze Brill would give it. But nobody was givin' the gal a thought. What happens tuh her if Blaze dies?"

"What happens even if he don't?" asked a puncher. "If Shade ain't took away his guns we'd be hearin' shootin right now! Blaze is plumb helpless—an' so's that gal!"

"You heard what me'n Clint talked about?"

"Yeah, an' now we all knows."

Charley looked them over grimly.

"Well, let's have yore opinions—differin' or agreein'."

Pair by pair he searched the flint-hard eyes set in the circle of expressionless faces finding, as he had expected, no opposition. This was all according to their code, applying alike to man or—good woman.

"When yuh figurin' on startin'?" was the sole question.

"Ain't no use puttin' anything like this off," declared Charley. "Now is a heap better than—later."

Swift adjustments of weapons or bandages. They stood ready.

Just then they heard a quiet call from a guard:

"Blaze Brill is comin' up!"

"Blaze Brill!" was the glad chorus, yet it was unbelieving.

Men crowded close, fighting men who, only an hour ago had voted

death to Blaze Brill, a death which each of them would have faced bravely. So there was no resentment, merely acceptance that one man, among them, had evaded death for a little while.

"But the woman!" came the anxious cry from Clint. "Where's Marge Stark?"

Blaze's shoulders sagged and there was no life in his tone.

"She stayed with Shade—right—willin'!"

"That's a damn lie!"

Clint Tenny barged in furiously, hand snaking to his gun, and men spread quickly on both sides. No one of them would take talk like that from anybody.

Yet, to their utter astonishment, Blaze Brill made no move!

"I wish," he mumbled, "I wish to God it was—a lie!"

"What happened?"

"She waited," explained Blaze monotonously, "until you rannies sent back your reply. She even asked Shade if I was through! Then, knowing a dead man was no good to her, she makes a play for that damned snake—right in front of me!"

"Damn you!" roared Clint and this time men smothered him from all sides. The mass surged furiously and Blaze, for the first time, showed a normal recation.

"Clint! Hold it!" he commanded. In the brief pause which followed he walked directly to Tenny.

"It hit me damn hard, too," he said quietly. "We'll both—have to take it—just like the play comes up."

Clint, surprised, nodded. He shook himself free.

"I'll listen," he promised.

Just then, bedlam broke loose below.

Hot words, curses and bullets banged through the narrow slit. From above, grinning guards threw down less curses than bullets.

"They jest found out about it, Blaze," reported one. "How come they didn't learn sooner?"

"That was because I bent a six-gun around one of those rannies' skulls," explained Blaze. "Maybe he just woke up."

"That ain't all uh it," called a man, who had been listening intently. "They's a ruckus further away. They know yo're gone—but somethin' else's botherin' 'em."

"Damn if Shade ain't gettin' tuh be a nervous old maid," growled Charley Burwash. "Couldn't yuh make out none of it?"

"Not rightly," was the answer, "but, it seemed, I caught somethin' about a gal—Marge—gettin' free!"

"Marge!" the name spurted from the lips of two men, Clint Tenny and Blaze Brill. Both Westerners reached for a gun, instinctively. But it was Clint Tenny who saw the gun Blaze Brill's tanned hand grasped.

"That gun!" he grated. "Where did yuh get it?"

"From her—from Marge's blanket roll. What the hell is the difference, anyhow?"

"All the difference in the world!" groaned Tenny. "That gun is mine! I lent it to her the time I dressed her in men's clothes."

"All right," admitted Blaze indifferently, "it's your gun—now you got it back. Here it is."

He shoved the weapon at Tenny and was about to resume his story when:

"Gawd almighty!" shouted Clint. "Blaze! Have yuh *shot* this gun?"

"None whatever—"

"Then look at this—which was plugged under the ejector! Read it!"

Blaze took an oily strip of paper on which was written:

"So long, Blaze. It's the only way I could figure out."

Even then, Blaze was wooden, his normal senses were dulled. He had to read it once more before all of the truth came to him.

"Oh, God!" the words were loaded with remorse. "'So long, Blaze,' it says—Marge was writing that to me! "It's the only way I could figure out'—Hell! The only way she could figure out for *me!* She wasn't thinkin' of herself—and I left her—bedded down alongside that snake—"

He broke off—snatched two six-guns from the holsters of two astounded men nearby—raced for the narrow passageway.

"Wait! Blaze—wait!" called Charley urgently.

But Clint Tenny was racing—so was Tomas de Miramon—so was every man who could move! It was suicidal madness. But no man in that outfit was in a mood to plan sanely.

They fell down the black, rocky chute after Blaze, they spilled into the bowl below almost into the laps of Shade's devil spawn—themselves greater devils now, yelling like fiends over and over the same name that Blaze and Clint were roaring.

"Marge! Marge! Marge!"

Human nature, too long under unendurable strain, was exploding!

No man in that mad gang could remember when, during the furious fighting, Marge Stark had joined them, nor how. Few could remember how they had come back, alive.

The girl, herself, less gripped by fighting mania, could only supply disjointed bits of the story.

"All of you, I think," she related, "heard the excitement when Tucson Tom found that Blaze had escaped. Shade Sloan stormed around like a wild man, yelling he'd kill the man responsible—and then I found the chance to sneak off into the darkness."

"Yeah," agreed one guard, "I done heard the ruckus they raised when Shade found *that* out"

Marge nodded.

"I wasn't far away. All I wanted was some black corner to hide in —until morning. Then, while they were quietly hunting for me, you wildcats arrived! Also hunting for me! I ran to the raving wildcats!"

"Thank God for that!" added Blaze, once more normal and, being normal he was planning escape for all of those squatted around him. "I heard you rannies made a plan to jump Shade tonight—outside of what happened."

"Yeah, we did. How many men has Shade got?"

"Countin' both parties, better than forty fightin' men."

"Which is four-tuh-one odds" whistled a listener.

"That wouldn't be overpowerin' if we were fresh," countered Blaze. "And if we had plenty grub, water and ammunition."

"We got plenty water but nothin' much else. Dunno how we kin hold out more'n a couple days."

"And that is exactly what Shade figures," stated Blaze. "He won't waste any more men rushin' us. He'll just squat where he is—and wait!"

"We ain't waitin'!" roared angry voices. "We built us a scheme tuh jump him tonight!"

"On this side?" asked Blaze.

"Any side. What difference does it make?"

"We can't get any broncs down that cut I came up—"

"We ain't needin' no more broncs—*after!*"

Blaze breathed deeply. It was the natural reaction of men who were fighters first and thinkers last. Blaze preferred to mix brains with gunplay.

"Let's figure this out—" he begun.

"We got no time fer that!" barked somebody. "We been chased continuous from one hideout tuh another, each time losin' a couple men an' wearin' ourselves out till we aint got no strength left! Hell! We fights while we kin still pull trigger!"

"If you rannies are dead set on dyin'," ground out Blaze, "anyhow pick out the best chance of livin'—for some of us!"

That brought silence and a measure of calmer thinking to these rabid warriors.

"Now," continued Blaze, "those rannies on the north side have heard this ruckus. Knowin' that Shade took along enough men to stop us here, they're not expecting any trouble over there. It's likely that only a few guards are awake. Some of us could easily sneak down there and raise enough Hell to give the rest of us a chance to get the broncs down and ride free. Every man draws lots except the hurt ones."

"Now you're talkin'," approved Charley. "Get goin'—"

"Wan minute, Señor," broke in Tomas. "Eet ees *bueno,* thees plan. But only Tomas weel ride. Thees udders weel stay an' hol' out two-t'ree more days, until Tomas come weeth help!"

"Help? Who's helping us?"

"My *vaqueros!*" was the proud reply.

"Tomas, we can't take that chance!" objected Charley. "You mix a crowd uh Mexicans with this wild bunch uh Gringos an' yore liable tuh set off a load uh dynamite. Yore men still recall that yuh was robbed of all this section —the Rancho de Miramon."

"*Si, amigo,*" agreed the Mexican somewhat bitterly. "But zey are *caballeros!* Zey weel forget all udder trouble an' fight only for thees so charming señorita!"

"That's downright noble!" approved Blaze heartily. "But this isn't as one-sided as it looks. We *all* were robbed, just like you, Tomas, and we're all fightin' to get back our ranches. I reckon we can throw in together without any trouble. We sure appreciate your offer, Tomas."

Only the whole, or slightly wounded, men descended the northern slope after Blaze. The others sprawled thankfully and pointed their rifles downwards to the south.

Tomas de Miramon ran skillful fingers over his horse, adjusting bridle and saddle expertly in the dark. He stood invisible then, except for the steady red pulse of a cigarette which marked his position.

The men who had gone ahead lowered themselves with the cunning silence of frontiersmen. Shade's guards, senses dulled by pre-dawn sleepiness, heard no alarming sound until they were overwhelmed by screaming, shooting black shadows. The night sparkled with powder flashes, increasingly brilliant as other men unblanketed had leaped erect to block escape of their quarry.

The din was sufficiently loud to engulf the clatter of steel hoofs against the rock as Tomas led his horse downward to level ground. Wisely, the Mexican skirted the edge of fierce conflict, chose a dark lane free of twinkling lights. Then, with a jab of spurs, he was speeding on the road to old Mexico.

No man, either on the attacking or defending side, heard him go. The poor patter of his horse was swallowed in the uproar of exploding gunpowder. Even Blaze, alert for an excuse to withdraw his fighting men, failed to note his going. But he waited until he was sure either that Tomas had left or something had prevented his escape.

Then, high-tenored and clear, he shrilled a command.

"Back, rannies! Back!"

Firing diminished as he friends moved slowly rearward. It ceased altogether when they reached the high protection of the crest of the pass.

Some one, from the well of blackness below, called:

"Reckon that'll learn yuh that yuh can't bust through!"

Blaze grinned thankfully. The ruse had worked. His enemies did not know that one man had gone through.

"And we learned the bunch on this side somethin'," chuckled a

guard on the southern side. "Shade heard the ruckus an' tried tuh come up—but we changed his mind right sudden!"

"Anybody hurt?" asked Blaze.

"Reckon nobody got hurt except accidental. It's too dark fer good shootin'."

"Then let's get some sleep."

A few hours later, breakfast was a sorry affair. A mouthful for each doled from the meager stock of provisions. Charley surveyed it ruefully.

"By the time Tomas gets back we'll likely consider a steak cut from some old boot a right appetizin' meal."

"Me, I c'ud pass up the beans without no trouble if I had me a bite of eatin' tobacco," offered a tired-faced puncher as he looked around hopefully. One or two frazzled bits were extended his way.

"Think the Mex'll make it?" came the question.

"I'm coverin' all bets," declared Charley. "He said a couple days, so we jest gotta hold up our end here that long."

"Then what?"

"Dunno about you, but I don't rest until I gets Shade—"

"Me, too!" That response was unanimous.

"Then, if Shade's so outrageous lucky that our lead misses him complete, we runs him clear outta this country an' spits up the range among the ranch owners."

"Speakin' as one of them," said Anse Claiborn of the Bar-shoe-bar, "I'm ready to pick up what's left of my outfit and throw it all into one pot. Dunno how Marge Stark and Blaze Brill feels about it."

Marge, looking at Blaze, nodded eagerly.

"How about it? All for one and one for all. I understand that the de Miramon family once owned all of Santa Inez valley."

"That Mex can have half of everything I've got—if I've still got anything," declared Blaze. "And these punchers—cut 'em in the deal, too, even-Stephen."

"Right generous," grunted one. "But we ain't got no chips. Us boys'd like tuh sit in yore game if yuh'd split it fairer, say ten fer the owners an' one fer us. Otherwise we jest rides fer wages like we done before."

Blaze looked right and left, seeing agreement among all.

"She's a deal!" he stated.

But Charley Burwash seemed doubtful. His abrupt gesture drew Blaze out of earshot.

"That'd be a first class deal if yuh was dead certain about all uh yore pards," he warned.

"What's wrong with 'em?" demanded Blaze. "Which one?"

Charley once more showed the three letters, saying:

"Yuh seen all these before, but not all together. Just compare the handwritin'."

Blaze inspected them with a slow deliberation. After a long time he met Charley's prying eyes.

"It's the same," he stated. "So what?"

"When yuh read them first two back in Salud," answered Charley steadily, "yuh agreed that whoever wrote 'em was one uh Shade Sloan's dames—"

"After what happened last night I'm takin' that back!" cut in Blaze decidedly.

"I ain't aimin' tuh have no run-in about this," declared Burwash coldly. "I done dodged one with Clint although he couldn't explain how come the gal knew so much about Slade's business. Mebbe you kin."

"I'm not trying," was the retort. "Marge is doing that."

"Let's see!" challenged Burwash.

Confidently, Blaze summoned Marge. Yet the girl's startled gasp and confusion when she saw the letters brought a frown to his forehead.

"How did you get these?" she demanded.

"Charley got them from Buck Cleary in Salud."

The girl whirled on Charley furiously.

"What business was it of yours? Are you a law officer?"

"Was!" snapped Burwash. "An' hopin' to be one again when I down Shade Sloan. I'm thinkin' you know plenty about Shade's operations which would be first class evidence in court."

"Why should these letters make you think so?"

"It seems nobody except Shade's gang knew Blaze was tuh be gunned. An' if yuh wasn't in his gang an' jest overheard their plans innocent—why didn't yuh come out open an' report it tuh the proper law officers?"

"I—I—couldn't."

"Why not?" bored in the man-hunter pitilessly.

"I—can't—tell!"

Charley flicked a significant glance at Blaze.

"I reckon that'll bog yuh down some!"

"Listen, Marge," began Blaze desperately. "We two shook hands like friends. Why can't you tell me—"

"I'm telling nothing!" flared the girl. "If you believe I'm in any way connected with Shade Sloan remember that I've given all that's left of the Diamond S to his enemies!

"I didn't want thanks for saving your life, Blaze Brill, but I didn't expect suspicion of my motives, nor that I should be required to explain why I did it just that way. You're alive, Blaze, so let it go at that!"

"You hold on, Marge!" ordered Blaze. "We're not letting it go

thataway—not until I've expressed myself. You saved my life—twice! I'm thanking you, right earnest. I'd be ungrateful to pester you about your reasons—and I'm seeing that no one else does!"

Charley Burwash didn't meet Blaze's outraged stare. He was watching Marge and the girl was watching Blaze. Her cheeks were flushed, lips slightly parted and a soft light glowed in her eyes.

Charley returned a grin to Blaze's angry face, shrugged and walked away. Sometime that girl would keep no secrets from Blaze Brill and sometime, perhaps, Blaze might clear up the mystery.

But the ex-Deputy U. S. Marshal, long experienced in the ways of people and their motives, was certain that he already had a plausible theory. The girl was a strand in the rope that he meant to tighten around Shade Sloan's neck—unless some honest man's bullet reached the outlaw first.

Chapter 9

THIS was the first time Blaze had had an opportunity to study the strength of the present position. The little band occupied the crest of a narrow slash in rugged mountains. Only one approach could be taken by horses, that being the northern. East and west the walls were almost straight up, overhanging in some cases. Blaze flattened against the east wall and stared west and up.

There were several points on the skyline where a rifleman might hide and drop dangerous bullets into their shelter.

"Why hasn't Shade tried that?" Blaze asked of Charley.

"Bein' down below he can't see that near as good as we kin. But he knows we couldn't get horses up them sides an' yesterday he was too busy blockin' the other two. Jest give him time, he'll think uh this too damn quick!"

"That's a tough climb from here but we've got to get a man up on both skylines," decided Blaze. "We'll be using every man for guard duty, night an' day, but we're just dog meat if we don't. And we do it right now!"

"Yeah," agreed Charley promptly. "Shade ain't no fool. Grab yoreself a rifle an' we'll climb up for a look-see."

The men made their separate ways to the crown of the ridge and, a half-hour later, grinned at each other across the space between them. They were still within easy talking range of each other, but neither could spare the necessary breath.

Rested, each bellied over onto horizontal ground and scouted carefully. Preparedness paid large dividends then. Blaze tensed and dropped between two boulders. He had seen movement considerably to the west and on the southern slope. He looked back and saw that

Charley was staring intently at him. Blaze waved a hand and immediately his friend went into hiding.

Nothing happened for ten minutes. Then two riflemen popped above the edge about five hundred yards away. Since they came on with no more than ordinary care, unsuspiciously, Blaze let them come on for the sake of greater accuracy of fire. His first shot must drop one man, surely.

Behind him, Charley was preparing to deal with a similar case, two others were scrambling toward him. He was jerked into action by the crash of Blaze's rifle and he shook his head just after pressing his own trigger. His target had fallen, but not limply enough to be counted out definitely.

Blaze, however, with the advantage of deliberate aim, had drilled his man lethally. The other had promptly dived for cover and was now lying as motionless as his dead partner. Blaze had frozen, eyes alone stirring. Patience, now, until his antagonist eased cramped muscles into a comfortable posture or, overcome by uncertainty as to the position and number of the enemy, tried tricks of Western warfare. His move must be first and he knew it—knew also the danger it involved. Blaze could afford to sit tight.

It was a burst of firing from the opposite side that spurred the man. With the swiftness of a scuttling lizard he flashed from boulder to boulder, heading for help. Blaze, gauging speed and distance, flipped a bullet through the next opening which, if it didn't find flesh, at least halted his target. Almost immediately a shower of splintered rock stung his face.

Blaze's eyes narrowed.

"I done got me a curly wolf by the tail," he commented. "Now, if I creased that hombre, or come damn close, he's man enough to take a chance on gettin' a bullet in me any old place. I'll give him some bait."

He pulled off one boot, then paused to think out the best line of strategy.

"He's likely still got his head pointed the way he went in. I'll show him my boot. If he shoots I'll drag it in fast like it's hurt. Then he'll expect my head to show on the other end and be coverin' that. If he does—*I got him!*"

He improved the deception by removing his other boot and cramming it into his Stetson. This he placed so close to the edge of the boulder that a slight shove with his foot would expose it to view—just where his opponent would expect to see it. Now, with the first boot gripped in his left hand, the right clutching the rifle, Blaze was ready.

Toe down, he scrambled the boot beyond shelter, moving it as though a man, stomach down, was wriggling into a better posture and had forgotten to draw in his legs. Breath bated, Blaze crouched tensely

ready. One second, two. A savage slap of gravel struck the boot.

"Yeow!" howled Blaze and roared blistering curses. A taunting laugh answered him.

Blaze fixed the exact direction of that laugh and pushed with his foot, slowly, inching his Stetson out while he counted a quick two seconds. Then with his eye already aligned along the grey length of his rifle, he suddenly thrust out his shoulders.

Two explosions sounded as one, two bullets leaped in opposite courses. One flung an unworn Stetson high into the air, the second bored a skull before it, too, punctured a hat. Blaze needed no more than one look to know that his battle had been won. He pulled on his battered boots and looked ruefully at the damage that had been done to a high-priced Stetson.

Rapid firing drew his eyes around. Two fair riflemen can make things extremely uncomfortable for one expert but the two Charley had tackled were better than average. Far from pressing the attack, he was definitely on the defensive.

Blaze raced to gain a flank position. Bare seconds might decide the fight. He caught the glint of sun on steel, saw a crouncing figure and dropped, panting, to the ground for steadier aim. Though the man he aimed at moved sluggishly, Blaze was hampered by extreme range. He spotted his bullets by dust spurts, and saw the last in his magazine shake his target. While he reloaded, the man dragged himself completely out of sight.

"That rannie was hit before I started," decided Blaze. "Else he wouldn't linger like he did. Havin' a double dose he's likely a heap disgusted with this war. Where's the other one?"

Charley showed him by rattling a tatoo with his rifle and Blaze picked out the cluster of dust puffs. Instantly, he spattered that place. Then Charley, having reloaded, resumed where his friend had left off. That was too much for the lone outlaw. He left at a bounding, erratic, zigzag course which defied Blaze's remote marksmanship and long before Charley could again get into action. The mountain top no longer held living henchmen of Shade Sloan. Charley turned a red-splotched face and raised a tired arm in thanks.

"Hurt bad?" worried Blaze.

"Jest scalped some," assured his friend. "What's that?"

They heard the sharp thunder of shots, infinitely multiplied by the echoes in the narrow canyon. Blaze looked over the edge and saw Clint Tenny on the opposite side. He had evidently been climbing to lend his guns in the high battle but now hung undecided at midpoint.

"Get back, Clint!" roared Blaze. "We're through here!"

"Not yet, we ain't," denied Charley. "Them rannies we ventilated has some ca'tridges we needs. Strip 'em clean!"

The operation was relieved of some of its distasteful qualities for

Blaze when he found one of his pet Remington .44's in the belt slung around the waist of the first man he had dropped. He gripped its butt as he would the hand of a friend, a sturdy, dependable friend. Recovering this gun paid for the ruin of a costly hat and badly scuffed boots.

Loaded with extra weapons and ammunition he dropped down the cliff to his friends below and found, on his arrival, that another attack had been repulsed. Two punchers were gently placing a third, blanket-shrouded, in a rocky trench.

"Who's that?" asked Blaze.

"Pete Gurney. We left him on guard while we was fixin' tuh come up after you. He was shot up previous but a lot worser'n we thought an' I reckon he wasn't right alert."

"Shade must've heard the shootin' up there an' picked that time tuh give us a surprise," added another. "He near done it, too, us bein' right worried about how you'n Charley was makin' out. Pete jest held out long enough tuh delay Shade—that's why the rest of us is still here tuh talk about it."

"Get any?" demanded Charley.

"Yeah—two anyhow," the puncher's eyes glanced keenly over them, noting visible damage. "You two wasn't playin' none up there, what was yore tally"

"Three. That ain't bad, huh?"

"Right good!"

A little later, Charley discussed that "tally" soberly.

"We can't lose but a couple more no matter how many we got. We gotta keep four men on guard continuous an' another bunch right alert tuh jump four different places all at once. The rest should be sleepin' an' there ain't hardly enough tuh go around once."

"It shore looks a heap discouragin'," admitted Clint. "But I wouldn't mind it so much if it wasn't fer Marge."

"Yeah, that's what's bothering me most," added Blaze. "Still, we're not licked! Shade's men won't keep trading five for one, even if Shade was willing—which he isn't. I'm betting he lays low from now on unless we start something. He'll figure on starving us out without losing any more men."

That reasoning was sound. Not knowing of Tomas' escape, Shade had not reason to believe that hunger would do less damage than his bullets. So Shade did nothing beyond making noisy demonstrations of gunfire and yelling. This happened at irregular intervals during darkness and was designed to break the sleep and the nerves of the besieged.

On the dawn of the third day, a Mexican tornado struck!

For Tomas, time had been his greatest obstacle. His friends and former *vaqueros* were scattered. It needed a day of hard riding to

gather a scant two dozen. Not a satisfactory number, but it must serve. Leaving instructions concerning the route for those who might join him later, and appointing a rendezvous for those already gathered, Tomas galloped in advance.

Two full days had elapsed and much might have changed in that time. He needed a few hours to scout the situation carefully, lest he waste his small force in unwise attack. To his great relief the Mexican leader found the enemy's strength divided as before, about half on each side of the mountains. His friends, then, had not been overwhelmed and most of them still lived. *Bueno!* Before long he would free them!

Near dawn Shade's sentries on the northern side had lapsed into semi-consciousness. Waiting for the inevitable surrender of a starved, sleepless and discouraged few was boresome. Only three men lay across ready rifles, yawning, while the main force sprawled in easy sleep.

One guard stirred restlessly. The flicker of a match etched, for a moment, the hard lines of his face strongly. Another man drew out papers and tobacco. Anything to keep awake. His drowsy drone came to the ears of his fellow watchers.

"Damn if I ain't ready tuh hit the blankets."

"So'm I. But it can't be more'n a hour till daybreak. The mornin' breeze is stirrin' my whiskers already. Smell the sage?"

"Hell! I'd a heap sooner smell some hot cawfee. Listen! You hear that?"

"That rustlin' noise? Yeah. Ain't nothin' but the animals an' birds. They starts the day right early."

"This is different. Thought I heard horses before."

"Shore—ours has been restless from not enough work. Me, I'm about ready tuh paw an' snort myself."

"Damn yuh, Lafe! Hush up a minute. I ain't convinced none. You, Curly, are yuh awake?"

A grunt and a low sigh answered the alarmed guard.

Lafe chuckled.

"Dead tuh the world! Shade'd shore skin him awake if—"

Abruptly Lafe's word's bubbled horribly. From his partner came a high-pitched scream of panic as sharp steel chugged cruelly into his shoulder. The stricken outlaw had time only to poke rifle barrel toward a leaping shadow, pull trigger instinctively, before a second knife blade reached his heart!

Peace exploded into pandemonium!

Rumbling racket of galloping hoofs—blare of bullets—shrill, sibilant Spanish curses as a squad of *caballeros* rode recklessly into a welter of white renegades. Jerked from deathlike slumber and hurled into eternal sleep, crushed beneath flaying, steel-shod hoofs, gored on horns of lunging lead—it was a miracle that some of the hardy outlaws lived

to fight at all, or that, in fighting as they did, they continued to live!

One or two, supremely daring, seized horses and spurred away in frantic flight. A dozen dispersed on foot, seeking shelter among shadows that were even now yielding to the command of a below-horizon sun. Behind them the Mexican cavalry "mopped up" without mercy. Later, aided by stronger light, they spread fanwise on a search which pried into every hiding place and, if successful, ended in a flurry of shots and a bleeding body.

Then the narrow cleft spilled gaunt men onto the plain, savage devils led by Blaze, Charley and Clint. Following slowly came the wounded on hungry horses, horses that must be tightly reined lest they overeat and die amid a small oasis of luscious grass.

In that hour of glad reunion, the cool control of Tomas de Miramon held the victory he had won. Staccato Spanish recalled his wide-ranging riders, saddled the fresh mounts in Shade's cavvy, started the exhausted party on a fast lope toward old Mexico and—plugged the hole down which a raging outlaw leader was surging at the head of his renegades!

Thanks to the war-wise Mexican leader's prompt action, Shade Sloan was unable to pounce on the weakened survivors of his seige. The uproar on the opposite side had brought every man on the southern end to his feet. Shade had paused but a few minutes before he tried to rush the position above. The return fire held him until dawn. Suddenly it ceased.

Suspecting a trap, Shade lost valuable opportunity by waiting too long. One daring outlaw risked his life in clambering up. His comrades charged after him. There was further delay until the last man joined them. That was the salvation of those who had just left.

Snarling in frustrated fury, Shade Sloan stood in the pass which had cost him so much to win and watched his prey disappear over the far horizon. Pursuit was impossible. His horses could not be brought over the mountains at that point. Moreover, part of his gang had been crushingly whipped! They were in no mood to invite further punishment!

Shade swung red-veined, savage eyes on his surly henchmen.

"If any uh you hombres got yore bellyful uh fightin', speak up now. We jest started! We're headin' back tuh headquarters tuh get plenty drunk. After that, I hire me some extry help an' carry on the fight till Hell won't have it! Them that don't like my program kin h'ist their yellow bellies on their broncs—right now!"

A tight grin spread across tighter lips. No man moved.

Shade's hard hawk face relaxed. A light, almost of pride, came to his glinting eyes.

"Hell! I reckon the drinks is on me, gents. I'm right proud tuh buy 'em!"

Chapter 10

WHEN Tomas at last permitted a halt, they were in old Mexico. The Mexican chieftain waved a hand to indicate a sprawling group of buildings half proudly, half in apology.

"Rancho de Miramon," he introduced, as though it were human. "Will you accept, *amigos,* what poor shelter and food it may offer? Maria! You will attend the Señorita Margaret Stark. *Caballeros!* My home is yours!"

Unconsciously, Tomas addressed his guests in formal Spanish. Few understood his words but his meaning was clear enough. Here, though he stood with the shabby ghosts of once grand possessions, his manner was royal. Sagging roofbeams, cracked walls or broken window panes were powerless to dim his just heritage. Though his servants were ragged, they served their lord with dignity.

Rested, fed and once more in excellent condition, Blaze and his friends took up a discussion of past events and laid plans for the future.

"Between us we shore give Shade Sloan plenty uh hell," was the satisfied statement from a wounded puncher. "Reckon he'll pull in his horns some now."

"Yeah—some," drawled Charley Burwash. "But that hombre is a heap persistent. They don't come much tougher! He won't stay down permanent!"

"What d'yuh figure he'll do?"

"Hole up an' lick his wounds like a hurt wildcat fer a couple days. When he's healed up he'll come out, a heap worse than he done before!"

"An' we lay 'm out permanent!" growled another puncher.

Charley hesitated.

"I done had a long talk with Tomas an' he can't promise much more help. Yuh see," explained Charley carefully, "it'll take a long, tough fight tuh down a hellion like Shade—don't get no different ideas!

"Yuh can't do no fightin' without grub, guns, bullets an' such," continued Charley. That costs money an' we're near broke. This gang uh Mexes is plumb willin' tuh help but they ain't got more'n a couple pesos among the whole bunch."

"They must be a little stock on my range yet," offered Anse Claiborn. "Round 'em up and sell 'em."

"Mine, too," came from Marge Stark.

"I'm willing," agreed Blaze. "But a roundup takes plenty time and scatters our gang too much. Shade's smart enough to figure we'd do something like that. He'd wait until we got a nice herd together and then run 'em off. It's a heap easier to play his own game."

"What yuh mean?"

"We need money," answered Blaze, "and Shade's got more than anybody else in this section."

"Hurray!" cheered the delighted chorus.

"Easy, son!" warned Charley paternally. "That scheme sounds right entertainin' but yuh'd have a harder time blowin' up a bank than shakin' Shade loose from his pile!"

"Hasn't he got some regular place to hole up?"

"Shore has, a humdinger. A big bowl in the mountains with jest one narrow openin' that he kin close tight. I ain't never been inside but I was told he built himself a small town there, plenty cabins, a saloon an' general store. Good water an' even grass."

"Where's this at?" asked Blaze.

"About five miles south of that minin' section. Near the north end of Santa Inez valley an' on the east slope of the Dos Amigos mountains. It's right convenient fer his rustlin' an' gold stealin'. He's shore ready, any time, tuh hand out plenty trouble tuh curious pilgrims. It'd take a good-sized chunk of the U. S. Army tuh dig him outta that hole! So jest scheme yoreself another scheme."

"We still need money," declared Blaze stubbornly. "And he's got a lot of ours. But until we get a better idea let's round up what cows we find close to the Line and sell 'em. We must eat."

With more than enough expert help one busy day of riding gathered all the beef cattle they needed.

"They're sure mixed plenty," commented Blaze. "I can see brands from every outfit around here and some I never heard of. I'm surprised to see a couple of my cows in that bunch. I was afraid I couldn't ante up my share."

"There's enough here of our three brands tuh keep our gang goin' fer a couple weeks," declared Charley. "Tomas has got a buyer waitin' an' we'll have the money first thing tomorrow morning."

"Shade's had time to reorganize by now, hasn't he?"

"I reckon so."

"Then the sooner we start keeping cases on him, the better," decided Blaze. "How about you'n me and Tomas hitting the trail when we get outfitted again?"

"Jest scoutin'?"

"Careful and right cautious," agreed Blaze. "We don't light on Shade until we're plenty ready."

"That's smart," approved Charley. "Don't tell anybody about our plans though. One or two of these reckless rannies scatterin' across the scenery would warn Shade that we're up to somethin'. That Clint Tenny's been a heap restless since we got here. Yuh notice that?"

"Yeah," muttered Blaze. "Acts like he's ready to blow up. He's got something pestering his mind."

"It's Marge Stark," stated Charley positively. "Wish we could send her away some place. She's liable tuh make trouble."

"How could she make trouble?" demanded Blaze.

His eyes roved in search of her as he talked. Then they steadied and narrowed. She stood some distance away and Clint was with her, his lips moving vigorously and insistently.

Charley Burwash missed no detail of the situation.

"How?" he repeated. "Yuh got yore ears laid back right now!"

"I'll keep 'em that way if I feel like it!" rasped Blaze. "What's he saying that must be done in private like that?"

Charley shook his head seriously. Jealousy was bad medicine anywhere, but mixed with two gunfighting rannies it was sheer dynamite! The older man stretched out a fatherly arm.

"Steady, son. Jest remember that any trouble between you an' Clint is goin' tuh grieve the one yuh love."

"What in Hell are you talking about, Charley? The one I love? Marge, you mean? Me—?"

Words died out. Over Blaze's rugged, tanned face spread a look of puzzled amazement. He seemed almost childishly bewildered.

"Gosh! Is that the way it feels? Wanting to rip open whoever gets near her? Falling off your feed, sleeping restless, snorting and pawing the dust—is that love?"

Charley knew better than to laugh.

"I reckon it hits some hombres thataway—like they was broncs bein' busted. Yuh'll fight yore head some an' buck yoreself into a lather, but in the end, yuh'll kinda like havin' yore ears scratched gentle an' whinny fer a lump uh sugar."

"You talk too damn much, Charley!" growled Blaze, irritated by a flush that crept warmly under his sunburned skin in spite of desperate attempts to control it. "Me—whinnying for a lump of sugar! My God, Charley, where did you get such a damn locoed notion?"

"Sounds right foolish," grinned Burwash. "But jest roll yore tongue around it some an' yuh won't shy away so much."

Blaze considered the matter leisurely and found the idea rather attractive. Yet, had he been able to overhear the talk between Marge and Clint, he would have been surprised to learn that their subject was also "Love."

"Marge, I can't hold this quiet no longer!" Clint had blurted breathlessly. "I'm deep in love with yuh an' I'm askin' yuh tuh marry me."

The girl faced him frankly.

"I can't, Clint."

"Why not?"

"I like you a great deal, I'm grateful for the way you've looked after me but—that's all. I want you always as a dear friend—"

"I'm keepin' yuh fer a friend," broke in Clint, "but that don't nohow satisfy a man like me! I gotta have yuh complete! My wife—from now until the last roundup!"

"That's the way I'd want it—if I loved you, Clint."

"That's the way it's gonna be!"

"It *can't* be!"

The decisive quality of her words merely toughened his determination.

"I don't savvy this Romeo business right good an' maybe I'm crowdin' yuh, Marge. I ain't askin' yuh tuh marry me right off. Not until I build up my own spread an' put the Diamond S back where it was. Take yore time. All I want is yore word, now."

"I'm not giving it."

"Yuh ain't givin' me no clear reasons—" began Clint but he bit off his speech abruptly. The girl's eyes had wandered away from him. They were gazing half shyly, half defiantly to the place where Charley and Blaze stood talking.

Clint flicked a glance and his breath hissed between clenched teeth. Every tiny and large muscle of his lean body whipped into place, compacted him into the gunfighter's pose. He turned back to Marge and his words were surprisingly low-pitched.

"So, that's why! Yuh can't make up yore mind—*while he's around!*"

"I made up my mind, long ago!"

"He's standin' in my way!" grated Clint stubbornly. "I'm gunnin' him out!"

The brown eyes that stared back at him levelly were now as ruthlessly steel-hard as his.

"You pick a fight with Blaze Brill over me and our friendship ends!" The statement was slow and deliberate. "And, if you are fast enough to kill him—I'll grab a gun—*and kill—you!*"

Clint Tenny gaped in utter disbelief. But, though he searched hopefully, he could find no tiny weakness in the girl's resolution. The cold pain of defeat was whitening his skin.

"I'm bein' licked for the first time in my life," he gasped. "I only know one way of fightin' back. With guns! And that won't get me nowhere this time." He raised his chin courageously. "I'm takin' it all, now. I gotta have this straight, Marge. You love Blaze Brill?"

"Yes."

"He's spoke for you?"

"No. He doesn't even know I care!"

"Suppose he never knows? Suppose he never says nothin'?"

"Then I'll never marry—anybody!"

"Damn—what a mixup!" ripped out Clint furiously. "Me lovin' you—you lovin' him—and him lovin' no one but his own sweet self! Hell! I—aw, so long, Marge!"

"So long, Clint," was the soft farewell. "I'm sorry."

Clint, stalking away, dared not turn. He flipped an arm upward in a parting gesture and dropped out of sight into a handy hollow. There he sat, chin on hunch-up knees, while his brain boiled! Hard hit, he could think of but one way to strike back. It would have been sheer ecstasy of relief to stare at Blaze Brill through gunsmoke.

Clint pictured that meeting vividly.

He wore one gun, strapped low on his right thigh. Blaze carried two, but the left one was a Colt he had just picked up. One of his peculiarities was that he preferred the balance and greater barrel length of the less known Remington "five." In a tight place, where speed was all important, Blaze would reach only for the weapon that fitted his hand as naturally as his thumb.

So then, in a duel, he was no longer a two-gun man. His opponent need not split his attention, he could concentrate on only the right side. Clint growled savagely. He could toss one gun with the best of them! There would be no doubt about the outcome. He'd be the man left standing. But then—?

Marge Stark would be further out of reach than ever!

Damn! Was there no way out of this mess? Clint leaped to his feet and paced as restive as a caged tiger. The sun lowered, long shadows crept from the west and draped his figure darkly. The call, "Come and get it!" shrilled repeatedly but failed to attract his appetite. Night had fallen when the harassed young man gasped:

"I gotta have action! I jest *crave* it!"

With that desperate decision he drifted toward the group clustered around a camp fire. Beyond the light, Clint halted. Facing him was a row of brown faces, silent, steady. These were the former *vaqueros* of the De Miramons, men approaching middle-age, past the years of recklessness. Clint looked further. There white teeth flashed against the brown background of youthful faces. These were the sons, nephews, younger brothers, all in their teens, spending their superabundant energy in roaring chorus as a concertina raced through a lively Mexican tune.

Youth called to youth, disdaining barriers of race.

Clint slipped to the edge of the group. Careless smiles gave him easy welcome. Clint sat silent until the faint excitement of riotous music had lost its verve. A Mexican youngster spoke the Spanish equivalent of:

"Let's take something apart and see what makes it tick!"

Clint knew just enough of the language to understand that.

"Anybody here talk American?" he asked.

"I do," answered a young man nearly Clint's age. "I done lived north uh the Line a couple years. Speak yore piece, hombre."

"You rannies is huntin' excitement—and I'm worse!" declared the

American. "Mebbe I got a scheme that'll hit yuh plumb center. Yuh all know about Shade Sloan. There ain't none uh yuh that wouldn't like to hang up his hide! I know jest about where he's holin' up. How about us tearin' him wide open?"

"Man!" exploded the young Mexican. "That's plumb perfect! Gimme a couple minutes tuh explain this tuh my pards."

Keeping a wary eye upon his seniors, the interpreter shot rapid Spanish, low-toned, at his attentive audience. They stifled enthusiasm, merely breathed subdued agreement of *"Si!"*

"Yuh kin count seven here, that's all uh the young bunch," said the Mexican to Clint. "Mebbe yuh want a couple uh yore pards?"

"They wastes too damn much time!" sneered Clint. "They been squattin' on their tails fer a couple of days argurin' and plannin' without gettin' nowhere. Hell! Mebbe they're figurin' on talkin' Shade tuh death! Me, I wanta throw lead!"

"So does we! We gotta fair chance uh makin' it?"

"Shore. Shade couldn't expect no play like this, not nohow He thinks he's sitting safe in his headquarters. He'll be so damn surprised when this bunch busts in on him, that he won't hardly get organized before we're through with our business an' are foggin back tuh the Border.

"If we pull off this raid successful an' get free with a lot uh Shade's *dinero,* we'll shore have the laugh on these old women what's hangin' back so damn cautious."

"That's enough fer us! Meet the bunch, Clint. I'm the Senora Kid," declared the young man proudly.

They shook hands solemnly.

"Glad tuh know yuh, Kid," said Clint. "But this ain't nothin' we'd like tuh have spread around. Have yore pards hit the blankets, pronto, but keep awake till the last hombre around the fire is sound asleep. That won't be long. Then we rides!"

Admittedly, Clint's reasoning was faulty. It imperiled the lives of youngsters who had a better destiny to fulfill. But Clint, knocked off balance by hopeless love, jealousy and rage, had reached the end of ordinary common sense.

Beyond the fire light he noted the suspicious stare of Blaze Brill and grinned suddenly. Low-voiced, he added:

"There's one who'd shore wreck our scheme—if he knew. He wouldn't nohow approve uh this jest because he never done thought uh it himself. We better wait until midnight so we don't run intuh him prowlin' around. We gotta be damn careful gettin' away."

In this, alone, Clint was planning wisely. He gave no thought to the dangerous end. His reckless spirit had found company in these equally reckless Mexican boys.

It was very late before Clint cautiously lifted his head above his

blankets. The fire had died to a dull redness which threw no light. One by one Clint inspected the oblong lumps which were the sleeping forms of older and wiser men. Silently, Clint unwrapped his body and, as silently, made his way toward the youngsters. He chuckled softly when he found most of them already asleep. It did not occur to him that they had better be left—asleep.

They woke readily to his light touch and were instantly alert and eager to start. Clint choked their enthusiasm until they had saddled and carefully led their horses beyond earshot. Then, mounted and jubilant, they raced toward foolish adventure.

Something, it may have been the far-off rumble, roused Blaze. For a moment he lay staring at the stars while his ears tested the sounds of night. Then he was up and, before long, was fumbling in dismay over flat, cold blankets which should have been warmly covering sleeping boys.

He shook Tomas, Charley and the older men.

His voice, too, shook as he told the bad news.

"Them kids lit out for a night of devilment. I'm only hoping they haven't done anything crazy."

"What could they do," muttered Charley, "an' where could they go?"

"Eight hawses is gone," called a voice from the corral.

After that worry held the camp sleepless. But the most ominous foreboding could not conceive such insanity as those kids were even now attempting.

The eight youngsters, although the older Clint and Señora Kid were included, had scouted the strong barricade which Shade had built across the narrow entrance to his stronghold.

Eight opinions were lumped in one disdainful voice:

"Hell, we kin easy climb that fence! Even if Shade has got guards inside, they're damn near asleep an' unsuspectin'. Before they wakes up an' gets organized, we eight is bustin' intuh headquarters where Shade keeps his *dinero*. We collects that quick, fogs back here pronto, an' then let 'im try tuh trace us in the dark. That's the plan! Let's go!"

With only so little preparation, eight hooting youngsters scaled the barrier. Two dazed guards went limp before their blazing guns. A dim light drew them to headquarters and here, half-dressed men who were sleepily investigating the disturbance, were mowed down by the daring invaders.

They had actually stormed their way to the very edge of treasure, as it was protected behind a safe's steel walls, before Shade had collected his wits and his men.

So far had unadulterated daring brought them. But now the massed might of Shade's killers struck!

"Santa Maria!" gasped a young Mexican as heavy lead ripped his bowels. "San José!" moaned another, mortally wounded. No hope

then, though they fought with the heroic valor of inspired zealots. Eight against a horde? What though they spilled eight each time they spewed a volley? More than the prayers of a half-dozen patron saints was needed to stop that endless outpouring of the spawn of devil-men whom Shade had recruited.

Shade's scourings were no reckless heroes who threw lead for the thrilling joy of it. They were being paid to fight, but they could not spend that money unless they lived. So they fought carefully.

"We can't last long!" gritted the grim Gringo who was Clint Tenny. "Them Mexicans is dyin' like real men. They re dyin' one by one—slow, an' takin' along plenty company but—still, they're dyin'. Me. I'll get mine soon enough. But, Hell! I couldn't die in no better company! What better luck could a fightin' man ask?"

His grin was gory. Blood dripped from a head wound down to his lips. His grin was still wide when he fell in the midst of seven valiant Mexicans.

It was long after before the worried ones back in old Mexico knew the whole story of that battle. They had, of course, trailed thirty-two hoof-prints across the Border. They had followed until the keenest eyesight among them had given out. Wind and drifting sand, rocky ground and a route that led through running water eventually baffled them.

Hope, then, for the safe return of lost ones fadded quickly. Accurately they guessed what had happened. As though they saw corpses before them, the outfit remaining mourned their dead.

Tomas, backed by bereaved brothers, uncles and fathers, demanded revenge. Immediate and ruthless.

"I'm declarin' myself with you until I can't longer pull a trigger," assured Blaze earnestly. "But I want a halfway chance for our lives. We learned what wild riding gets us. We can't down Shade Sloan by brute force and awkwardness!"

"So we do what?" demanded Tomas impatiently.

"The plans ain't changed none whatever," declared Blaze. "We gradually whittle down Shade's men and his income. That doesn't suit your Spanish style, Tomas, but it's sure the best!"

"I'm agreein'," supported Charley. "We done had proof that nothin' but calm, premeditated plannin' will win. Tomas, we sides with Blaze an' plans us a right sensible campaign."

A shrewd leader himself, Tomas recognized wise counsel.

"*Si,* amigo. We look, we plan—an' sometime we fin' ze way for Shade to die! But we start now. We ride, no?"

They rode, north into the U. S. Two Americans, Dan Donovan and Herb Landbrenner, picked for their keen, trailwise eyes, and three

Mexicans, old-timers who had ridden Santa Inez valley while Tomas was still a boy, accompanied their leaders.

Debouching into Santa Inez valley from the mouth of Rustler Pass, they halted. Blaze explained their mission.

"We're just trying to find out where Shade is hanging out and what he's aiming to do. We split up here. Dan, you ride with me along the west slope. Charley and Herb take the east side. Tomas and his gang sweep the center. We don't do any fighting."

"What are we here for, then?" grunted Donovan.

"If you run into trouble you just throw a few slugs where they'll do the most good and then retire," explained Blaze. "Behind you will come all the rest of our gang, divided even and picking up the war where any of us leave off. This isn't a stand-off for heroes, dying gallant. Fight while you got a chance. Then run! To Hell with your pride!"

Those orders were not so easily accepted by Americans or Mexicans who were burning for revenge. Yet they agreed for the sake of ultimate success. Blaze had said it would take time and determined effort to reach that goal. *Bueno!*

All they had on their hands was time and no place to spend it. Effort? Well, if that meant climbing high hills, crossing waterless deserts or charging into a hail of bullets, that was just in an ordinary day's work to these punchers, brown or white. And, if those were the orders, who were they to stand upon the dictates of pride?

Only Blaze Brill and Dan Donovan ran into trouble. That was on the west side of Santa Inez valley, near the north end where Shade Sloan maintained his headquarters.

They were about to separate rather widely, the better to cover their assigned territory quickly.

"Ride careful, Dan," was Blaze's parting advice.

Donovan squinted sidewise and spat a mouthful of tobacco juice with a hint of impatience. He came of the breed which digs trouble from hidden places, exposes it to view and gives no heed to consequences.

"So far," drawled the Donovan, "I been right successful in keepin' too many slugs outta my tender hide—all by myself."

"I'm not aimin' to interfere with your rights thataway," returned Blaze steadily. "Only, it seems like we agreed to work all together and with me ramroddin'. Were you objecting—"

"I ain't yet!" denied Dan. "But I don't need no nurse leanin' over my cradle. Are you insistin'?"

Brill's eyes narrowed.

"We got plenty time, fellah! If we both come through this ruckus with Shade we relieve our feelings. But, just now, our friends are relying on our guns being pointed the right way.

"Personal, I don't give a damn about you," dictated Blaze, "except every fighting man on our side is worth three in Shade's bunch. We need you alive. Outside of that—make your play!"

"Like she lays. I'll see yuh later—mebbe in Hell!"

With a defiant gesture, Dan loped away on his scouting mission, telling himself that "he wasn't takin' no one man's orders—jest ridin' along with his pards." Perhaps seeing red blinded his otherwise sharp eyes, for he blundered into a wooded gully before he recognized dangerous possibilities. Only swift reversal prolonged his life.

His horse had been dragged to a straining halt and spun about, when hidden rifles roared. Dan took one of those bullets in a slanting blow that rasped along his thigh bone. The intense, burning pain of it seared him suddenly into insanity.

He whirled again and galloped into sure death! He had two pistols and a rifle, all fully loaded, a horse that would keep going until he was dead—what more could a fighting son of Erin ask?

Without any warning, almost beyond rifle range when Blaze recognized his mad action, there was nothing his chief could do to save him. Blaze, cursing foolhardy courage even while he admired it, threw the full load of his rifle far ahead of the charging puncher, hoping to beat down the inevitable barrage and give the oncoming rider a chance to close with his enemies.

Dan got within pistol range, while his guns were fully loaded and unfired, before he was again stung by a bullet. A miracle! But the young Irishman made the most of it. Twelve shots from his two Colts brayed into, or close to, the bodies of his foes, and some distant rifle bullets from Blaze did their best. Dan Donovan lived that long against expert marksmanship!

But Dan crowded his luck too far!

He had just snapped his empty Colts into their holsters and reached for his Winchester in his boot when a lead slug gouged its way into his heart!

Dan Donovan fell off his horse and over him raged the bullets that came from Blaze Brill's distant rifle.

Nothing more could be done. Dan was dead and Blaze lay alone to face overwhelming odds. According to his own instructions, he threw slugs where he hoped they would do the most good. A group of men came up from the support troops but they were unable to do more than teach caution to the enemy.

It was only when the men belonging to Charley and Tomas joined forces that Shade decided to call it a day. Again, he had lost more than he had killed.

Back in the Rancho de Miramon, Blaze interpreted the results of the day's activities.

"Shade's staying close to his headquarters, on the Santa Inez side.

What he's doing on the other side we don't know except that he's covering it right determined. Let's hope he figures he gave us a lickin'—"

"What fer?" demanded a doubtful voice.

"To make him take a few chances. He must get his stuff out through Santa Inez valley and Rustler Pass or change all of his plans. Maybe he'll try a small shipment, guarded by just a few men and under cover of night. If he gets that through, he'll be sure he hasn't figured wrong and will get a heap more confident. Then he'll try a shipment that'll be worth our while to take away from him. We'll wait for that to happen. Am I right?"

Judging by the response, Blaze Brill was right, not only then but during his past contacts with this mixed mass of punchers from various ranches in his own country and the slowly relaxed antagonism from the men across the Border. Something about this quiet-voiced young man had inspired confidence among all the men.

Tomas de Miramon recognized that and, because he was too much a man to permit petty jealousy, he subordinated his leadership to the Northerner who had stepped into foreign country.

"Señor Blaze," he said, "I'm theenk my *vaqueros,* for thees time, weel follow wan Gringo. But my fran', Charley, w'at you theenk about zat? You speak yore piece, huh?"

"We gotta have one leader an' work like jest one outfit," decided Burwash. "If yore steppin' out willin', Tomas, they ain't no better man than Blaze Brill."

"Before you decide this," declared Blaze, and the angle of his jaw was set rocklike, "I'm not accepting unless we have a clear understanding. Clint Tenny and seven brave Mexican kids died without getting nothing. Dan Donovan did likewise. Passing up the respect all of us have for fightin' rannies, we still got—nothing! We don't get any place thataway. You pick me for a leader and that's what you get! I'm boss—or I'm stepping out to take a better man's orders—right willing!"

"It's gotta be thataway," agreed Charley. "Them that don't like it has gotta talk up now. There ain't no talkin' later." Nobody objected.

"Tomas de Miramon is my *segundo,*" appointed Blaze, instantly seizing opportunity, "in charge of the Mexes. Anse Claiborn ramrods the American punchers. You're free, Charley, to give me Hell when you feel like it. Are there any objections?"

"One," came a soft voice. "Where do I fit, Blaze?"

"Can't overlook you nohow, Marge, you being a ranch owner. Suppose you be a lady—uh—a lady of leisure."

"No bet, Blaze. Being a woman my place is in the kitchen. So I'm chief cook—and I don't want any arguments."

"Marge, I'm never giving you any arguments," declared Blaze, and he meant more than the words conveyed.

Chapter 11

"WHAT's the meanin' uh this?" demanded Shade Sloan of Tucson Tom, as he stared down at dead bodies. "That Clint Tenny was a Bar-shoe-bar man, how come he's mixed up with a bunch uh young Mexes that don't fit in no place? You ever seem them afore?"

"None whatever," denied Tucson.

"Then what's the answer? Blaze Brill shore'n Hell hooked up with them rannies from the wrecked ranches, him an' Charley Burwash an' Tomas de Miramon. Tomas done pulled in some uh his old-time *vaqueros*—which would explain these young Mexes, perhaps. But, if Blaze made connections he's ramroddin' the spread an', if he does, he shore as Hell wouldn't let nothin' like this happen. It don't make no sense!"

"It don't make no sense," was Tucson's agreement. "Could it be—I'm jest sayin' *maybe*—that Blaze Brill is playin' dumb? Could it be he's sacrificin' some help in order tuh mix us up?"

"Dammit, Tom, that ain't his style!" denied Shade, thoughtfully. "Now, that gang we drove off yesterday—at first it looked like Blaze's headwork, comin' at us so cautious, with men scattered all over the valley. But when that young rannie come chargin' in all by hisself—Hell, Blaze wouldn't nohow send a man at us thataway."

"Mebbe he done that clear against orders," offered Tucson. "I'm almost shore that young rannie we rubbed out was once a Bar-shoe-bar puncher—"

"Jest like Clint Tenny," cut in Shade eagerly, "an' I know fer a fact Clint hated Blaze. Mebbe Clint pulled out the hull Bar-shoe-bar, but Hell! That ain't reasonable—they jest *had* to stick together, whether they hated each other or not. But—what was that bunch tryin' tuh do?"

"I dunno," shrugged Tucson.

"Now, if it was Blaze, he might've been makin' some smart move. I've gotta know where he is an' what he's doin'. I'm givin' him some bait!"

"Bait? What kind?"

"Burros," answered Shade. "Burros, loaded down with rock!"

"Ore?"

"Hell, no! Jest rock!"

"Yuh think Blaze takes anything like that?"

"I dunno. I'm hopin' so. Anyhow, only us two knows what's goin' on."

"It'ud be worth a try," advised Tom.

So Shade Sloan sent out a decoy shipment through Rustler Pass that night. Only he and Tucson Tom knew that the burros staggered under heavy loads of worthless rock.

His own men believed that they protected extremely high-grade

gold ore. Consequently, the vigilance they maintained was priceless. It not only deceived them, but their apparent concern convinced the silent watchers among Blaze's outfit. They roosted high in the rocks of Rustler Pass and, with much grumbling, allowed undoubted treasure to slip through their fingers.

Yet they obeyed strict orders.

Those were to trail the small party to its destination. To observe closely, do nothing else and to report in exact detail everything that had happened.

Opportunity, wide open, tempted these impatient watchers but they remembered, vividly enough, Blaze Brill's stipulation that he must be the undisputed boss—or that somebody stronger must take his place.

Thus they made no mistakes, captured nothing worthless and carried back valuable information.

"That'll convince Shade!" jubilated Blaze when he heard the report. "Next time we get us a real stake! From now on we fairly haunt Rustler Pass. Oil up your guns, rannies, and keep your pockets open to hold heavy *dinero!*"

"Where kin we cash anything like ore?" asked somebody.

"At the place where that gang stopped. It's run by a hombre named José Ortega," informed Blaze.

"But he's been dealin' with Shade. Yuh reckon he'll feel safe tuh switch over tuh us?"

Tomas settled that doubt.

"I'm theenk so. Mebbe José weel not feel safe -cef he don' do w'at we say, huh?"

"We'll try our most convincing manners on him," agreed Blaze. "But first we must have something to show him."

They waited through two silent, fruitless nights. On the third, the click of steel-shod hoofs on rock promised reward. Yet Blaze held back his eager outfit.

"What's the matter with takin' this now?" demanded Charley. "We shore got 'em where we want 'em."

"Not yet," denied Blaze. "Ive got a better idea."

He called Tomas.

"You know the way those hombres must take from here?" he asked.

"*Seguro.* Only wan way from thees place to José Ortega."

"I want a spot just about like this one, but it must be in old Mexico near Ortega's place. You know one like that, Tomas?"

"*Si,* I know."

"I can't savvy this nohow," muttered Charley. "What difference does it make where we gets it—jest so long as we does?"

"That's fine," approved Blaze. "If you can't figure it out, won't it puzzle Shade a heap more? Let those rannies get to Ortega's, let 'em

sell the ore an' carry back hard cash. In some lonely valley nearby a bunch of Mexicans take it away!"

"Ah, *banditos!*" now Tomas was grinning widely. My *vaqueros,* zey do those job. *Bueno!*"

"Right! Us Americans keep out of sight, we only appear in case something goes wrong—"

"Señor! Nozzin' weel go wrong!"

Tomas left to gather his men. They stood around him in a dark huddle, broad sombreros nodding indifferently as he outlined the new plans.

"They don't seem much excited about it," observed Blaze. "Looks like it's old stuff to them."

"It's more'n likely," agreed Charley. "Them De Miramons done lost every dime they once had. They didn't have enough tuh eat, hardly, unless they go some *dinero—some place!*"

The Mexican contingent led the way confidently to a narrow valley that lay remote between low hills. One man they sent ahead. In the meantime they smoked brown paper cigarettes or dozed.

Curious Americans, having eyed all preparations keenly, rolled smokes too, and relaxed.

Blaze summed up the general opinion.

"We'll be hiding in the rocks nearby but those Mexicans won't be needing our help. They're ready now—all except pulling up those bandannas over their faces."

Now came the man they had sent ahead, reporting in Spanish:

"*Amigos,* they come. Six Americanos who have looked upon the *tequilla* unwisely. The gold they carry in belts about their bodies, equally divided. We take that without trouble."

Smokes were smothered promptly then. Though the six Americanos had dulled their senses with strong liquor, they might detect the odor of tobacco and be prepared to shoot, which would be lamentable.

But they were surprised into bloodless surrender.

Two dozen black shadows which had been clumps of sage under the starlight converted themselves, without warning, into that many men who pointed slivers of steel and said nothing. They stood in a complete circle and made gestures which could not be mistaken.

Shade's six hesitated only long enough to discard thought of suicidal resistance. They flung down loot and weapons, raised six pairs of hands and waited. Bodies, unmistakably Mexican in odor, approached and inspected them carefully to be sure that nothing of value remained. Then, one by one, they slapped the rumps of six horses and sped them and their riders northward.

The Mexicans had done their work well and the reward was highly satisfactory—a cold five thousand dollars. But that brought up a problem in distribution. On equal shares, to which every man was en-

titled, more money was available than the average forty dollar a month cowhand could spend sensibly. Given any sort of cut, the inevitable result would have been wild excess in the nearest *cantina*.

Blaze dared disapproval of the majority.

"I'm dealing out two American dollars to every hombre that claims it," he dictated. "That's enough, if you mix your drinks judicious, to get feeling good without anybody forgetting his home range. The rest will be protected careful until we need it. Who's arguing?"

"I am, right strenuous!" shouted an American puncher. "I dunno how much I got comin' but I'm demandin' it, right now! An' I ain't askin' you fer permission tuh spend it, fellah!"

"Fair enough," conceded Blaze calmly. "Who else is asking for his time?"

"Hey! I ain't askin' fer my time," protested the puncher, "jest what's a-comin' tuh me."

"You get that without any argument. It's about three months' pay. If you put that in your jeans tonight are you showing up here tomorrow morning?" demanded Blaze.

The puncher hesitated between liquor-lust and loyalty. He, as well as Blaze and every drinking man there, knew what would happen if he went to town with all that money in his jeans.

"Hell, Blaze," apologized the rider, "I guess I ain't that thirsty. I kin stand it fer a spell yet. Gimme my two bucks."

"Right happy, *amigo*. Anybody else want more?"

With good sense predominating, no man asked for more than a tiny share of the loot at that time. It was enough for a small night.

Even better than the loot was the fact that Shade Sloan could not trace his loss to any operations of his former enemies. He heard the report with a surprising lack of rage. Although it was a blow which hurt, he was drawing a measure of relief from the news.

"Yore dead shore it was Mexes?" he demanded again.

"Couldn't hardly make no mistake about that," assured one of his men. "They talked Mex, they looked Mex, they even smelled like Mexes."

"But the leader," insisted Shade. "Was it Tomas?"

"None whatever. I knows him. An' it wasn't Blaze Brill nor Charley Burwash, either. They wasn't no Americans in that bunch."

"What yuh think, Tom?" Shade turned to his lieutenant.

"Like you does, Shade," returned Tucson promptly. "We ain't seen nor heard uh them rannies fer a couple days now. They done high-tailed it."

"How does Clint Tenny an' them seven young Mex kids fit in? An' that Bar-shoe-bar rannie?"

"I ain't rightly figgered that out," muttered Tom. "It seems like, now, that Blaze done let 'em go out on a wild try, while he was plannin'

somethin' else. But nothin' else happened—not fer a couple days. I can't savvy Blaze bein' in this section that long without plenty Hell bein' raised."

"There ain't no other answer!" decided Shade eagerly. "That Lub gang, includin' Blaze, done got their bellies full uh fight. They give me plenty Hell but they finally run out. That lets me grab this section by the tail—on a downhill drag! From now on I only gotta send enough riders down into Mexico tuh keep 'em from stealin' our stuff. That'll be easy!"

That was as Blaze Brill had hoped. His strategy was sound from a military viewpoint: keep the enemy guessing and strike where he least expects trouble.

From a good outfit he picked the expert trailers and scouts, gave them the best horses, and worked them hard night after night. A thin screen of spies constantly patrolled the south end of Santa Inez valley, investigating every activity and bringing word concerning the number and destination of all travelers heading south toward the Boarder. By day hidden watchers crouched on the mountain tops on both sides of Rustler Pass.

Though Shade ran through a few small parties, nothing happened. The entire section lay silent and apparently deserted. Nothing would happen until something sufficiently valuable appeared to tempt Blaze. Answering his outfit's protests against delay and monotony, he said:

"We can only pull one surprise raid in Rustler Pass and then Shade will clamp down hard. Not a dollar's worth of stuff will leave his headquarters until he finds out definite who's behind the raids. So we wait patient until we get enough to make our trouble worth while."

"Enough to quit?"

"Enough! But we're not quitting—no matter how much it is. We never quit until he's dead or so badly whipped that he must run!"

"*Si! Si!*" came from the vengeful fathers, brothers and uncles who had lost their youngsters.

"Shore" was the roaring agreement from the Americans who could not forget Clint Tenny, Dan Donovan, Chuck Callaghan nor any of the others.

"When Shade Sloan comes raring and snorting out after us, we don't wait for him—"

"Why not?" was the impatient cry. "Make it a stand-up fight!"

"We still haven't got his army thinned out enough," opposed Blaze. "I don't want to be chased into any more holes! Not any! We just hang around Shade like a bunch of hounds chasing a cougar, nipping him sharp and wearing him right down to a frazzle. Those of us that he chases—run! The rest of us bite him on the tail!"

Slow grins brightened dark faces then. That was the sort of grim

play which suited the untamed tastes of the outfit. It had tang, swift action, hard riding, gun-ruckus—it was perfect!

Every man there enjoyed "twistin' a curly wolf's tail" and they knew there was enough chance to get theirs twisted to make the game keenly interesting.

"Sounds like right invigoratin' exercise," grumbled Charley. "I'd rather sit still. But, if I gotta go scatterin' across the scenery thataway, I wanta be forkin' the fastest bronc."

"Right," agreed Blaze promptly. "We couldn't be spending our pile for any better cause than on blooded stock. I lost my top bronc and I've been right lonesome for one that I could trust through Hell and high water."

Among these horse-lovers the suggestion aroused all the enthusiasm that little girls would feel for life-sized dolls. Eager grins seconded a unanimous vote of approval.

"Where'll we get 'em, Blaze?"

"Tomas has been doing a heap of whispering—I reckon he's got the answer already. How about it, Tomas?"

"*Si,* I know!" Tomas spoke breathlessly. "Señores! For long time I 'ave weesh for *dinero* to buy those so gran' *caballos. Amigos,* I cannot wait! Pedro Dominguez weel go, pronto!"

"How long will it take?"

"T'ree-four days."

"That's fine. We can spare a few men that long," decided Blaze. "Now, having fast horses and riding in small bunches we'll be spread considerable. Before we start anything we must pick out meeting places right careful. In each place we cache plenty grub and oats, somewhere near water. That'll mean plenty work teaming and it must be done at night. There's no better man for that work than you, Tomas."

The Mexican nodded.

"That's the layout," concluded Blaze. "Anything more?"

"It's a good scheme," commented Charley slowly. "But when Shade gets tired of playin' 'tag'—and he's downright mean about such things—he'll jest set his jaw an' take out after the nearest bunch uh us, regardless. Allowin' that we outrun him, we still leaves a trail fer him tuh follow—an' he'll follow that clear through Hell! Sometime, he'll find the caches we need fer this kind of ruckus. Then this scheme jest blows up."

"That's looking a long way ahead, Charley, but I thought of that. I said Tomas would pick out those places right careful, but I was meaning, too, that they'd be spotted so that the easiest way into them would lead through a gully, past a nest of rocks or across a stream, maybe. The minute Shade began trailing any one of our bunches, right determined even after he lost sight of 'em, all the rest of us would head for that place, hell-awhooping!

"Like you said, Charley, Shade would be so dead set on wiping out *somebody* that he'd likely have nothing else on his mind—and maybe he'd run right smack into an amush."

"I give up!" admitted Charley Burwash solemnly. "I'm shore glad yuh ain't out after *my* hide!"

Blaze flashed him a quick grin and turned immediately to the details of a previous plan—that of capturing rich plunder when Shade should risk sending it through Rustler Pass. Very nearly two weeks had passed, uneventfully.

In the meantime, Shade had been pacing his headquarters fretfully.

"Damn! I'd like tuh get my mind easy on this," he growled. "Things is too damn quiet tuh suit me! A week ago I was dead shore an' now I'm worryin'—mebbe about nothin'. We can't find out where Blaze Brill, Charley Burwash nor Thomas de Miramon has went. That's agin all reason. Them three might run—but they wouldn't run far! The set-up jest ain't right!"

"Lay low until they uncovers," advised Tucson Tom.

"Hell, Tom, I can't *wait!* Expenses keeps pilin' up an' not a damn thing comin' in! I gotta move—first! We took a lotta ore that's jest rotten with gold! It keeps pilin' up here but that don't mean I kin meet the next pay-roll."

"Yuh ain't down that clost tuh the bottom uh the sack?" asked Tucson, in surprise.

"Yeah, I am! There's plenty high-grade been accumulatin' but I can't use it for pay!" snapped Sloan.

"Hell, Shade, if that's the case, we gotta run through a shipment."

"No way out," agreed Shade. "We can't pack all that on burros, we gotta use four-horse wagons with every man guardin' it' right alert. I'm runnin' that through, personal!"

In the meantime Blaze had been busy with counter preparations. In so far as guessing ahead was concerned, and devising plans to defeat any possible move Shade could make, the outfit was ready for anything. Scouts and guards were keenly alert, day and night.

Just after dark one night word arrived that some of Shade's men were on the move southward.

"Five burros, heavy loaded, an' three riders," reported the scout. "They can't hit Rustler Pass in less'n two hours."

"Let 'em come through," ordered Blaze. "But our whole outfit takes its regular post, just in case."

An hour later, a second messenger arrived on a panting horse. This time the news was important.

"Shade's on the move! Must be takin' his whole gang!"

"How many?"

"Too dark tuh count 'em but they's a heap uh riders. They're es-

cortin' a train uh heavy-loaded wagons, each pulled by four hawses. That first small bunch is mebbe leadin' by three miles or so."

"When will that first bunch reach the Pass?" asked Blaze.

"About a hour or a little better."

"That's bait!" declared Blaze. "If we jump them, the three riders will run, raising plenty of hell to warn Shade. He's just far enough back to hear any shooting in time to save his stuff. Has Shade got any riders out ahead of him?"

"Two, anyways. A few right alongside the wagons an' the main bunch trailin' behind some."

"Call in all our men—quick! Charley, ride out to meet them. There's five men. Bunch 'em north and west of the Pass about rifle range off. Hold 'em quiet even after the shooting starts here. Don't open up on Shade until he shows sign of moving back. Then pour it into them—don't give them any chance to change their minds!

"Tomas! Your men will cover the west slope of the Pass. Send a small gang down to the south end, string a few along but hold most of 'em bunched on the north end. Anse! Do the same with your rannies along the east slope.

"Unless something unexpected comes up—here's the plan. Let that small bunch ride by, I'll send some riders after them later. Shade's main gang is trailing the wagons now, but he'll likely push part of 'em ahead when he reaches here. It's so narrow here that he can't have anybody ridin' alongside the wagons.

"If he splits his bunch half ahead—we got him! All our bunch that's strung along the sides will pick up and follow the leading bunch. Even if they make some noise among the rocks the wagons will be making more. All the rest of us stay at the north end to blast the gang trailing the wagons. Is that clear?"

"Yeah," said Charley. "But suppose Shade keeps his main gang right behind the wagons, like they're ridin' now?"

"That's where you come in. In that case, most of our gang stays right at the north end and showers down lead the minute the last wagon gets into the Pass and can't nohow turn back. That'll set Shade right back on his heels, hunting for cover."

"Then my bunch keeps him goin'!" was the agreement. "Looks like she's a winner, Blaze. I'll get started now."

"Good luck, old-timer."

Blaze made last-minute checks on the locations of all of his men, cleared up minor points, repeated instructions until he was sure they were fully understood.

The last man had crawled silently to his assigned station, the last movement had ceased and become a fixed shadow. Then, in the dull quiet, a faint sound fluttered. Nearer, it could be recognized as the patter of hoofs. Shade's "bait" was arriving.

Only a thin slice of moon shone palely amid the white glitter of stars overhead. Just enough light to reveal figures passing lighter patches of rock and pick dull gleams from cartridge belts, the horses' bits or their rider's spurs.

One man rode in advance—a tightly packed wad of dynamite quivering in readiness to explode. A rifle stretched tautly across a stiffly crooked left arm, a clawed right hand hovered near the pistol holster. This man had no illusions. He knew he was "bait" and, perhaps—a sacrifice! He risked ambush so that Shade might continue to live to pay salaries and a cut of plunder!

Five burros, uncursed by imagination, plodded after him.

Two humans, exact duplicates of their leader in physical and mental tensity, followed them.

Behind, ahead, and on both sides—death crouched among the black shrouds of concealment—and delayed its striking! Unharmed, the little helpless party passed on.

An hour, also, passed on.

Again, faint sounds came to the straining ears of the listeners in Rustler Pass. This time it had solid substance, a heavy quality which beat against the earth and sent strong tremors ahead. Chugging hoofs and rumbling wheels anounced that Shade Sloan was pushing his "big stake" into old Mexico.

Two men, considerably in advance, rode "point." Keenly alert, these two, but without the nerve-stretching rigor of the three who preceded them. Strong support was within easy call, sharing the same danger, and so blocking excessive anxiety.

As they entered the Pass the pair slowed progress the better to scan the checkered slopes. Low-toned comment came clearly.

"Hell!" snorted one, loosening his reins again, "ain't no use uh us strainin' our eyes in here."

"I dunno," doubted the other. "This don't look like no Old Ladies' Home tuh me. We shore wouldn't live long if them hellions we tackled once was hidin' in them rocks."

"If they was, they would have jumped Nevada Jim's outfit, wouldn't they? An' Nevada swore he'd give us warnin' even if he was dead! Come on, are yuh waitin' fer Shade tuh step on yore hocks? We gotta keep goin'."

"Wait a minute. This place jest don't—*feel*—right! Let's have us a good look!"

"Damn yuh, we ain't got time! Shade done said tuh push through fast until we hit the Border! That's where we runs intuh trouble, not here. Get goin'."

This was good news to the listening men in ambush. There was no question now about whether Shade would ride in. He would! And without too much caution.

But he came in with a formation that gave the greatest number of his men the best chance to live if enemies lay in wait for him within the Pass. Only five men rode in directly ahead of the wagons, all the others, about thirty, halted until the last wagon was nearly a hundred feet beyond the entrance.

Then a clear call from Blaze Brill:

"Let 'em have it!"

Credit Shade Sloan with courage and a true leader's concern for the welfare of his followers.

He spurred his horse, an animal crazed with fear of the flickering thunder on three sides, up to the very tailgate of the rearmost wagon. This for no other reason than that his bellowing command might reach the greatest number of his trapped men. His lungs did their utmost to shriek above the shriek of speeding lead:

"Back! Come back! Every man!"

Outlaws who had turned teamsters for this night, relayed that order as far as it might humanly be heard beyond that din. Those outlaws, matching the flare of their guns against the flare of others on both sides, dodged behind cover of halted wagons or, failing, died! Three of those ahead got back to their leader. Only when the last one, hard hit, gasped the word that no one living was left behind him, did Shade turn north again.

But, hardly had he ordered a slight retreat to safer ground, when furious firing hit him in the flank. That was Charley Burwash and his five scouts. Except for night and a moon just born, Shade Sloan's outlaws would have been wiped out then. In fact, except for lucky hits, almost all of that party lived to ride again.

Shade Sloan did not take defeat passively. He held his position, slinging bullets at every flash that relieved the darkness until he was sure that the situation was hopeless.

Whoever was opposing him knew the exact location of his men, and Shade was no man to waste effort. Better to save what he could of the catastrophe, better to run and live to fight another day. To fight with an even chance of success! To fight ruthlessly to the end—whatever it might be!

It was not cowardly withdrawal, merely good sense. Shade left his fortune behind in the hands of his foes, not without seething curses that, some day, he would take it again. He had nothing left but enough to pay his outfit for a month or so. Yet he would hang on to what little remained, build it up once more, and come surging back.

As Charley Burwash had repeatedly insisted, Shade Sloan would not stay licked long.

But, for the time being at least, he was yielding to Blaze Brill's clever maneuvers. He had lost upward of a dozen dead, a small for-

tune in gold and silver ore, a crushing blow to his kingship in Santa Inez valley and, worse, the confidence of his men.

Another King of the Valley had been raised to the Throne! A serious-minded, shrewd-thinking, two-gun man—Blaze Brill!

Chapter 12

LONG before Blaze Brill was aware of the subtle danger of his new rank, a girl warned him.

"You are a strong man, Blaze," avowed Marge proudly. "You've got two races, American and Mexican, united behind you. Taking into consideration the bad feeling between Gringo and Mexican, that in itself at this time, is wonderful work. More than that, you've stopped Shade Sloan, the man who drove out other fighting ranchers but couldn't lick these three!"

"I'm setting those three back on their feet," declared Blaze. "The B-H brand, the Bar-shoe-bar and, especial, the Diamond S."

"Thanks for that, Blaze," returned the girl sincerely. "But when you've done that, what happens?"

"Then Tomas de Miramon gets half of what his family lost years ago, half of the Santa Inez valley."

"Magnificent! But after that?"

"Why the whole valley is parceled off to the owners that fought for it. That's fair."

"It is fair!" conceded Marge. "But what happens after that?"

"Nothing—what's biting you, Marge? After what?"

"After you get the small spread that was known as the B-H back where it was before, the smallest in the valley! Are you, Blaze Brill, satisfied to leave it that way?"

"No!" he stated positively. "I deserve a big slice of this cut—and I'm taking my winnings!"

"That's what I thought," declared Marge. "You're thinking it would be nice to own all of Santa Inez valley."

Blaze hesitated, searching his inner desires.

"Well, what's wrong if I do?" he demanded. "What are you worrying about so long as the Diamond S gets an even break?"

"There's something more. Above my interest in the Diamond S is my interest in a man who has the ability and fairness to keep clean a part of the Southwest which is badly misgoverned now. You are that man, Blaze Brill!"

"Marge! Do you mean that? No fooling?" His words were slightly breathless, confused by mingled hope and disbelief.

"I mean every word I said," she assured him.

Blaze looked around quickly.

"I've got something to say to you. In private."

"None of your men can hear us here."

"They've got eyes though. Let's take a walk."

He seized her arm with a masterful confidence unlike the usual

manner of Western men toward women. When they had reached a secluded spot his words, too, were decisive.

"Marge, once I made a play for you in the wrong way. I'm trying it again. I've been loving you, without knowing it, since the day you slapped my face. Marge, I need you at my side, always.

"With you around everything seems to go better, I even talk better English. Nothing could stop me if you were my wife!"

"You're sure of yourself, aren't you, Mister Brill?"

"Yes, of myself, but I'm not so sure about you. Marge, was—was —Clint Tenny—anything—to you?"

"No, Blaze. I'm terribly sorry he—died. He made that foolish raid because I told him I loved you—"

"You love me!" cut in Blaze exultantly. "Marge! That's all I wanted to hear—"

"You must hear more! You've had a taste of power and you like it so well that it worries me. You've reached your high place over the bodies of dead men! So far, only those who deserved it died but, if you find others in your way, will you kill them?"

"My friends! Are you plumb locoed?"

"Other men, crazed by blind ambition, have done that! I've seen it so close to home that I can't take a chance of it appearing in—in my husband!"

Blaze throttled his hot resentment and forced himself to calmness. The girl was sincerely disturbed. Her words, under ordinary circumstances an insult to an honorable fighting man, were forced out by bitter past experience. That was clear to Blaze.

"Marge, somethin's been troubling you for a long time," he said seriously. "You admitted you loved me—but you haven't said you'd marry me. Are you holding back because of something that happened before we met?"

"Yes," she answered frankly.

"If that was cleared from your mind and I wasn't shocked too scandalous, would you marry me?"

"Yes—if it didn't make any difference to you."

"Well, it don't, no matter what it is." Blaze took a deep breath, and an abrupt change of tactics. It seemed that his eyes were gleaming sternly but—perhaps not.

"Come here, woman!" he snapped. "Quit this foolishness, right now! Fit yoreself proper intuh my arms an' spill what's on yore chest! No holdin' back—none whatever! Yuh hear me?"

"Yes, Blaze."

"Then come ahead!"

It may be that Marge chose to pretend awe of this masterful brute. Quite meekly, she advanced to the enfolding circle of two arms which clamped around her like steel tongs. They hurt her soft flesh but it

was a pain which she endured heroically. After a while she no longer pretended, even to herself, that she didn't want to be confined in those hard bonds, forever.

Now she was sure that she might tell Blaze everything without losing the smallest part of his comforting protection.

"Let's have it," prompted Blaze. "It's something about Shade, isn't it? And I want to hear the reasons for you mixing up with all the doings—before and after I was gunned!"

"All of it!" she agreed. "Perhaps it was only a silly woman's fancy but, that day when I saw you ride into the Diamond S and talk to my father, you fitted exactly into my girlhood dreams!

"I had just graduated from an eastern college where men were only dancing partners. You rode into our place on a snorting horse, pulled him up with a careless yank, and sat there with a gun glinting on each hip as though you owned the whole world!"

"I was only half owner of the no-account B-H spread."

"I saw far beyond that! I saw you as a cattle king, ruling all of this vast territory!"

"That was no dream," declared Blaze complacently. "Me and Pat aimed to do exactly that. I only rode up to ask your Dad to throw in his outfit on my side against Shade Sloan."

"That's the one thing he couldn't do!"

"What was stopping him? Shade Sloan?"

"Yes. When we came here Dad had only enough money to run a small outfit. One day Shade rode in on a friendly visit and, after a short talk, he suggested that we had enough grass and water to run a big spread and offered to loan Dad all the money he needed.

"Dad jumped at the chance. With Shade's money he built a find home for me, first class barns and bought a large herd of cattle from Shade. When he had spent most of that Shade suddenly asked for his money. Of course Dad couldn't pay and he couldn't borrow a dollar anywhere. Perhaps Shade saw to that. Then Dad discovered that the paper he had signed was a Demand Note—payable any time Shade felt like calling it!

"After that Dad was Shade's man—he couldn't afford to be anything else!"

"That was only the beginning, I reckon," suggested Blaze.

"It was. The beginning of horrible things!" The girl shuddered. "Shade practically took charge of the Diamond S. Rustled cows were often re-branded in our corrals, they were turned out on our range to allow the scars to heal. It worried Dad sick, but Shade only laughed at him when he protested. Dad couldn't stand it, so he went to the sheriff—"

"To Lem Bates!" cut in Blaze scornfully. "He was once one of Shade's punchers. That was a bad mistake!"

"The worst possible!" agreed the girl wearily. "Bates went directly to Shade with the whole story. From that time on Dad was a virtual prisoner on his own ranch. Shade gave him no chance to escape. Our ranch often resembled another hangout for outlaws, and they made their plans openly before us as though we were nothing but furniture. They merely warned me that Dad would be killed if I tried to get away or attempted to communicate with honest law men outside of San Luis County."

"But what about your men? Didn't they put up a fight?"

"Shade forced Dad to discharge all of them and hire an entirely new outfit."

"Shade's men?"

"No—just others who didn't know the situation. They were good punchers but, naturally, they were not as willing to give their lives for our sake as the old bunch. Given time, the new men would have fought for us loyally—in fact they did when it came to the show-down. Those that are left are still with me."

"Yeah, they're good men. That's why I was wondering how Shade could have moved in with them around."

"But Shade didn't move in—he just rode up at odd times to keep Dad worried and careful. Every time one of our punchers got off our range some of Shade's gunmen followed."

"Gosh, Marge, you were in a tough spot."

"I was terribly frightened. Even when I learned of their plans to wreck your ranch I couldn't find a way to warn you. But when I heard those ruffians brag that they had wiped out all of the B-H, together with its owners—I was frantic! Remember, Blaze, I had fallen in love with you at first sight –and you didn't even know I was alive!

"The next day Shade broke in with the news that he had gone back to the place where he had left you and Pat Hurley apparently dead and found that your bodies were gone! He was wild! His best trailers were put on the job, they figured out about where you had gone and Shade sent four killers to finish the job!

"That was when I risked Dad's life in trying to save yours! I wrote a letter to the sheriff of Pago County and sent it with the last of our old punchers with orders to deliver the letter and keep riding—he would have died quickly if Shade ever discovered what he had done!

"In the meantime, I had no way of knowing whether he had been able to deliver his message. I had to know! So I managed to get away that night and I nearly killed my horse getting to Salud."

Blaze Brill's eyes were wide with admiration.

"One time I was cussing you for a coward kid," he apologized. "My Gosh! What a chance you took! Didn't those gun-slicks of Shade's know you?"

"Yes. But they were keeping under cover in the hotel room, never

leaving it except at night—so I was able to dodge them easily. I listened outside their door and heard them plan your death! I didn't know what to do—I was afraid that Buck Cleary might be as crooked as Lem Bates! That's why my second note to Buck was worded so queerly. Thank God, he was honest! When I knew he would guard your sick, weak body I rode for home immediately."

"Didn't Shade know what you did?"

"Not right away. I always stayed in my room while any of his men were around. I turned my horse loose before I reached our ranch, hid the saddle and bridle, and walked in. I got back to my room without being seen. But, when that wounded gunman finally staggered back, his report set Shade to thinking. He had no proof, but he suspected what had happened. Poor Dad! I'm afraid my actions were the direct cause of the raid on our ranch—and his death!"

"Take it easy, Marge," soothed Blaze. "Barring none, you're the bravest girl I ever knew. I'm thinking old Ed must be proud of his daughter. He'd want you to do just what you did, wouldn't he?"

"I know he would! He wanted to warn you himself, but they watched him too closely."

"Listen, Marge. Charley Burwash was disgraced and thrown out of the Government Service because Shade Sloan framed a dirty deal on him. Charley's hurt bad—inside. What you know would help him plenty. Will you give him his chance to clear himself?"

"By wrecking Dad's good name?"

"Charley isn't that kind. He'll use what you tell him carefully. He'll recognize that your father was trapped by Shade just as he was himself."

"I'll tell him."

Charley Burwash, called into conference, listened eagerly to the girl's story. The bitter lines that had been cut into his face by unmerited disgrace gradually lost their harshness.

"I'm shore a heap obliged tuh you, Marge. While it don't give me the evidence I really need, it's a big help in the right direction. It's something solid to work on."

"It won't hurt Dad's—"

"Don't yuh fret none about that," cut in Charley soothingly. "Blaze would likely get mad at me if I tried that—and I shore don't want him lightin' on my neck."

His shrewd eyes flicked from man to woman.

"Mebbe I should be offerin' my congratulations—or is it still a deep and dark secret?"

Blaze grinned uncertainly. Marge answered candidly:

"It's never been a secret to you, has it, Charley?"

"Not since I first seen yuh, Marge. But Blaze was kinda thick between the ears. I usta think he was right smart—"

"Don't listen to that old windbag," cut in Blaze quickly. "I just didn't want to stampede you with sudden action." He swung toward Charley. "Now, if yuh done spoke all uh yore piece, mebbe yuh got business some place else?"

Charley grinned broadly.

"I shore have. An' it'll take me a long time."

Their unfinished business took Blaze and Marge quite some time too. Having settled it to their complete satisfaction, Blaze was free to carry on his duties as leader of fighting men.

He called Tomas de Miramon into conference.

"We've got a lot of gold and silver ore which isn't doing us any good —not as ore! It's time to talk business with Ortega."

"Eet ees time," agreed Tomas, "but we do not talk. Thees José Ortega ees bad hombre—an' talk ees wan theeng he do not like!"

"Maybe he's a bad hombre," nodded Blaze, hitching his guns. "Maybe he needs a heap of persuading before he talks—but we're taking that ore along. We need some help, your *vaqueros.*"

"*Si,*" grinned Tomas, "zey would be beeg help."

"I was figuring on them driving the wagons."

"*Bueno.* Zey drive. But w'at you do w'en zey get there? Ortega ees play—what you call—ze game, weeth Señor Shade so long he don' like to play weeth us, no? So you let my *vaqueros* do ze business."

"I don't understand this," hesitated Blaze.

"You come weeth. You see."

That night, Blaze rode along curiously.

A few hours on the trail, Tomas halted the wagon train in a dark valley.

"Señor, we stop here," he explained to Blaze. "Luis weel go firs' weeth you. Zen we come. You do not'ing, señor, onlee look—no?"

"I'll look, sure," declared Blaze. "But I'll be keeping my guns ready for whatever happens! We're both in this—together!"

"*Si, amigo mio,*" agreed the Mexican softly. He turned to his *vaquero,* Luis, and his instruction were low and in Spanish.

Luis nodded, then made a gesture to Blaze.

"*Amigo,* we ride, no?"

It was only a few minutes before they saw lights ahead, and the outlines of José Ortega's buildings, dark blots amid the foothills of the mountains. Blaze dismounted and fumbled his way to the hitch-rack, sniffing the fragrance of the clean night wind that descended from sage-speckled slopes.

Inside the dingy saloon, the air was bad—smoky and stale.

Only one other man was inside.

The man behind the unclean bar who gave him a stare just as smoky from his black, sullen eyes. He asked, in Spanish, what would be the Señor's pleasure but Blaze shook his head.

"No savvy Espagnol," he explained. "Got some cold beer?"

The man nodded, but his nod was colder than his beer.

Blaze sipped it and wondered what had become of Luis.

"You come far?" asked the man behind the bar.

"Far enough tuh need a drink," nodded Blaze, allowing his eyes to wander furtively. It was now apparent to him why Tomas had sent him ahead. Any Gringo would capture the attention of José Ortega and hold it until he was satisfied about that Gringo's status. In the meantime, Tomas would be busy checking-up—the number of men in the saloon, the men who *might* be lurking outside and those who might be within reach.

Evidently Luis had done much of that investigation because Tomas opened the front door just then and, with a curt, "José Ortega," immediately jerked his finger toward the opposite end of the bar.

"So that's the enemy," thought Blaze and raised his glass for another sip. He strained his hears but nothing came to them except swift Spanish, low-pitched. All he knew at the end of the conference was that Ortega did not like what was proposed.

It was then that Tomas made a slight sign and, from the rear and every other entry, came Mexicans—all with a gun on the hip and all smiling brownly. Even Tomas smiled.

Blaze, having served his purpose, was ignored.

He made a rapid check-up of the number who had ridden with him. Five were not there—where were they?

Perhaps that was what worried Ortega. His black eyes were shifting restlessly. It was quite clear that whatever means he had of protecting himself depended on an easy way either in, or out of, his saloon. Tomas had covered every one and, in addition, had unseen guards—some place!

Blaze was learning something about Mexican psychology but, before he understood any of it, he was astonished to see José Ortega setting up drinks for the house, a suave host attending to every desire of his patrons, including the neglected Gringo.

"Salud, Señor Americano!" Tomas raised his glass to Blaze with a bright grin, and there was unmistakable triumph in it.

"Here's how!" returned Blaze, a bit uncertainly. He knew that he was no longer needed but not why. This, he understood, was his cue to exit and he was fully aware that one phase of American-Mexican relations was not to be disclosed. Tomas de Miramon would deliver every last peso he extracted from José Ortega as payment for the American Blaze Brill's high grade-ore but the details of that transaction must remain a secret.

"Adios," said Blaze. "I'm headin' *north!"*

That would be enough. It was both a farewell and a promise to

meet again. As he pushed his way through the door he heard:

"Adios, señor. Perhaps we meet *mañana."*

It was *mañana*—tomorrow—that they met again. Tomas turned over an unbelievable amount of real money, with a promise of more when José Ortega had time to convert all that gold and silver ore through secret channels and it was "greased" on its way. José had been properly "convinced."

Blaze had hardly heard Tomas' splendid report when he heard another, almost as good.

"Señor! Pedro Dominguez ees come back!"

"With those blooded horses you promised?" asked Blaze eagerly. "Where are they?"

"In ze corral—Señor Blaze—zey are—wonderful!"

He was keeping step with the hurrying Blaze Brill—just as much excited. They reached the corral which was lined, every foot of it, with no less excited cow-punchers. Blaze threw his leg over the least occupied rail, and jumped down, inside.

He looked over the bunch of horses keenly.

"They're beauties—every one!" Then he called, much as a mother might entice her child, "Girl! Come here"

Ears in the *remuda* lifted—swiveled to the voice of a man. None was afraid, they had been too gently raised. But one, a dark brown mare, moved toward the man who had called. She stopped a few feet away. If he wanted her, he would call again.

He did.

"Baby—come to me."

That was enough. The mare stepped daintily to the lone figure, nostrils wide to catch the scent of him, finding it, and fearing nothing! She moved confidently within reach of a new master, nuzzled him, let his strong, brown hands skim through her mane, pat her neck and caress her nose. That was as it should be!

Smiling men had watched that shameless love-making between horse and new master. Blaze turned to the group.

"I've got—mine! What's holdin' up you rannies?"

Tomas, Charley, American punchers and Mexican *vaqueros* alike moved eagerly, but gently, into that marvelous mass of animals. Two languages they spoke, softly, but whether Spanish or English it was language readily understood by horses.

Marge came out to stand beside Blaze and his horse.

"Oh, Blaze!" she cried. "You've picked a beauty!"

"I didn't," denied Blaze a bit unsteadily. "She picked me! I just called to the whole bunch and this one came out—right to my hand! This isn't only an animal on whose back I can jump and ride—it's a partner!"

"I understand, and I'm glad I saw this," said Marge softly. "The best horse chose the best man! Will you—name her—after me?"

"Marge! This is a horse!"

"Yes—but she loves you. That makes it two!"

"It's a bet!" Blaze swung quickly to hide his emotion. "Now, look at those rannies—fighting over a choice of horses that almost an expert could hardly tell apart!"

It needed a bit of diplomacy to smooth aroused resentment among these horse-lovers about ownership but it was managed. Each rider, glancing from bill-of-sale to horse, eventually was delighted.

Superbly mounted, Blaze's men set eagerly at work in making ready for the last desperate struggle. The winners would be undisputed masters. The losers must leave their bodies to rot away or carry them fast and far. It must end no other way!

While Blaze was freighting supplies to the various caches and minor hideouts, Shade was heaping every resource into one concentrated mass. Every negotiable paper was cashed, every man who owed money to Shade was ruthlessly wrung dry. Every other man who possessed currency which could be taken from him, by any means whatever, made forced contributions. Raids, more daring than any before, increased the final jack-pot to a point which satisfied Shade's immediate needs.

It was atrocious banditry that enraged decent men and turned former allies against Shade Sloan. None but paid friends remained and they would last only as long as his money.

It had been José Ortega, frightened and furtive, who had awakened Shade to this reckless fury.

"Señor, I weel do not'ing—not w'ile thees Blaze Breel ees alive. I 'ave been afraid for Tomas de Miramon an' hees *vaqueros* but Tomas —he ees take order from Señor Blaze—he must be one *muy malo hombre!*"

"The Hell he is!" snared Shade. "I can lick him—"

"Señor!" cut in Ortega decidedly, "those ore w'at I get—eet was een *your wagons!* Blaze take zose from *you!* He ees ver' strong—I do not'ing for make heem mad wiz me—no!"

"I'll blast him!" swore Shade viciously. "I'll blast him an' Tomas an' Charley Burwash an' the hull gang—clear outta this valley!"

But José Ortega merely shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Even that failed to daunt Shade Sloan.

"Hell! All I gotta do is down Blaze!" was his opinion.

He hired every remaining gunman in the territory who would kill for pay. Adding them to his veterans, he then commanded a force which counted three for every two that Blaze Brill could muster.

Once more at the head of a formidable pack Shade surged out of his lair. This was his last play, but he made it with no less confidence

than his first and such was his personality that his outfit followed him convinced that they never before had been licked.

The new men among them had never sampled the strong meat of the opposition. They counted only the odds and were satisfied.

Man for man there was probably no difference in individual fighting ability. But the odds were whittled down somewhat by the superior morale of the men who called Blaze their leader.

Every one among them gave his guns to right a wrong done to them, or to the ranch owners who had formerly given them steady, honest employment. The normal cowboy loyalty to a fair boss ruled them. Not one hired gunman polluted their decent members.

Moreover, the least of them owned one full share of everything that all of them won by their efforts. That was something unusual. An extra bonus for something they would have done anyhow. What the Hell! Every rannie had a better bronc than he had ever forked in his life, and the bill-of-sale for that bronc was being treasured in a safe spot. If any jasper wanted a better shot at Heaven he must be damned anxious to land in Hell.

Beyond any doubt, Blaze Brill had the most loyal and willing outfit of sturdy warriors any leader ever had.

"Give yore orders, Blaze, we're carryin' 'em out regardless!" had been the hearty assurance.

"I'm not doubting that, none whatever," was the reply. "And I'm right proud to know that your sentiments run thataway. We made all our plans right careful and there's no chance of us losing out. We'll likely have to fight like Hell to make 'em turn out that way but, sure as Hell, that's the way they turn out! We haven't got a damn thing to do now except wait until our scouts tell us that Shade Sloan is making his last play!"

Those scouts soon told the news. They told, also, that Shade could lose by death one-third of his outfit and yet lose one man for each that Blaze might send ahead to die! Bad news! But it would be evened up by keener brains. Blaze was ready for all that Shade might inflict.

Shade rode against him according to the tactics which always had spilled blood on the sage in enough quantity to allow him to drive ahead without too much interference.

This time he met a counter offensive which was beyond his experience. It wasn't regular, it was contrary to all Western types of warfare, but it was efficient!

Chapter 13

RULED by his bulldog nature, growling in anticipation of fierce battle, Shade led directly at Rustler Pass, the scene of his worst defeat. On his way he met a small party disputing his advance. That was one of Blaze Brill's roving patrols which were hovering like gnats on all sides, invisible until the need for exposure arose.

Shade looked the first bunch over and, seeing nothing dangerous in his path, calmly moved ahead. To his surprise a brick hail of accurately directed bullets cut into his ranks and stung flesh.

"Run 'em off!" ordered Shade and flipped his hand as though brushing off flies. "They won't make no stand."

He was right. The minute they saw signs of pursuit, the bunch turned tail and ran.

"Jest like I expected," sneered the outlaw leader.

But what he didn't expect was another party, seven or eight, which came from behind and burned his rear as venomously as wasps. Two men slid slowly from their mounts. A horse leaped sidewise, squealing. Shade whirled and charged them at a gallop. But, immediately, all opposition faded. The attackers retreated slowly, casting wary glances backward.

Shade grinned derisively but his men cursed savagely as they bandaged wounds. Shade's grin was on his lips only, his eyes were narrowed and thoughtful. He was trying hard to guess what this odd action of Blaze Brill's men could mean.

"This don't look funny tuh me!" snarled a bleeding man. He should have known better, but he had just been hired and had much to learn of his chief's character. "When I gets hit—I hits back! I'm takin' out after them rannies—if you ain't!"

"Are yuh?" asked Shade gently. "You an' who else?"

"I got three pardners that feel likewise."

"That adds up tuh four. They's twice that over there."

"They're runnin', ain't they?"

"Yeah, they're runnin'," agreed Shade.

His indifferent gaze rested for a moment on the belligerent gunman, then swung toward Rustler Pass. His extended arm indicated a notch on the south skyline.

"We're headed fer that," he said. "You an' yore pards kin easy ketch up with us if yuh want tuh linger here some."

"It ain't takin' us long," boasted the other. "Come on, gents! Somebody ketches themselves a right good lesson!"

Shade watched the four spur recklessly northward, saw the larger group instantly increase speed and gallop west. When pursued and

pursuers had dropped out of sight beyond a rise, Shade moved once more toward Rustler Pass.

"Somebody shore will get a right good lesson," he decided. "And I ain't right certain yet who it'll be."

Perhaps ten minutes later, the sound of furious firing came down the northwest wind. Some of his men pulled up but Shade rode onward calmly. One man, another newcomer, crowded close.

"Don't yuh hear that shootin'?" he challenged.

"I ain't deef."

"Them four done run intuh heavy trouble."

"You must be a mind-reader!" gasped Shade, openly awed.

"Mind-reader, Hell! Some of our bunch needs help an' we're givin' it!"

Shade rubbed sidewise in his saddle, his eyes now as cold and brittle as glaze ice.

"You learn awful slow," he chided gently. "Mebbe *you* want a lesson—delivered personal?"

"What yuh mean—" began the denser man. Then—too late—he acquired a measure of wisdom. But he persisted in folly—snaked hand to gun!

He never learned how "Shade" Sloan had earned his nickname because fast as he was, he was beaten to the draw by a split second—a shade of time. But each new man in the outfit learned! There were no longer any doubts as to what it meant to cross that leader's will.

Shade blew a thread of smoke from the barrel, slipped a fresh cartridge into the chamber and lit a cigarette.

"Does any hombre feel like coverin' that—or does we let him lay out in the open?" he inquired.

Some men moved, silently, to the labor of burial—not neglecting to remove articles of minor value from the body. That completed, they followed without question wherever Shade chose to lead. Unshaken, deviating not a hair's width from his original course, he loped forward.

Again enemy horsemen appeared, heated rifles briefly, and fled. Again, from an opposite direction, others flung lead rapidly and drifted slowly away, heads hung rearward in insolent watchfulness. They ambled just beyond rifle range, tempting a headlong chase.

Meeting the doubtful eyes of his men, Shade spoke:

"Who's forkin' the fastest broncs? All right, take out after that bunch hell-fer-leather. Don't go more'n a mile—but make it the fastest mile yuh ever rode! Then turn back—no matter what happens! The man that disregards them orders knows what's comin' tuh him!"

His instructions were carried out exactly and he watched the outcome of that race with concentrated attention. What he had suspected was now confirmed: he had no horse in his outfit that could outrun the

slowest of the others. His riders removed the last hope when they returned on blown mounts.

"I jest proved I got the fastest hawse in this outfit," bragged a proud owner. "But even though I piled leather intuh him right strenuous I wasn't gainin' on *that* bunch. What the hell is they forkin'—eagles?"

Shade made no reply. His face was a wooden mask, his square jaw set. Never had he resembled a stubborn bulldog so much as now.

Undoubtedly the coming conflict would match pit-bull and wolf. Grim, unswerving advance seeking to clamp hold on the enemy against swift slashes and instant retreat, which halted near enough to remain a menace on all sides.

Bulldog Shade kept moving ahead. Blaze, wise wolf, used his fewer men and faster horses to the best advantage. But, his men were scattered and only seldom under his direct control.

Not all of the smaller group leaders were level-headed. They would sometimes make mistakes—costly ones, if Shade Sloan uncovered them —and Shade was no man's fool!

Blaze Brill's strategy had been so convincingly successful that it had inspired reckless confidence in his men. Before he was aware of that, before he could dampen hot enthusiasm, one of his sub-lieutenants lost his good sense and plunged into disaster.

That man led four others. He saw opportunity when Shade sent only three riders after his total five. Hell! Why not wipe 'em out? That was easy enough! So, disregarding positive orders, that leader elected to make a stand rather than retreat.

This was exactly as Shade Sloan had hoped. Shade knew that country—no man knew it better, except Tomas de Miramon who was too far away to give sensible advice to ignorance. Shade used his knowledge to deadly advantage. With swift orders he spread groups of riders cunningly around Blaze's isolated few.

"If them rannies only lingers jest a few more minutes!" prayed Shade to his war-god.

And they did!

Then Shade had them in a six-gun and rifle grip which could no more be unlocked than the jaws of a pit-bull! The doomed five, three Americans and two Mexicans, struggled mightily to free themselves. Except that they made their passing a costly victory, they fought futilely.

That was bad enough but their rash action threw all of Blaze Brill's delicately balanced and nicely timed plans utterly out of schedule. Worse, the total collapse of one important, though small, party left others spread perilously in the open, uncertain as to the next move and all subject to Shade Sloan's ugly attention.

Only furious riding at a horse-killing pace pulled all of Blaze's roving patrols free of danger into safety once more.

Then the leader spoke in an icy fury:

"Gents! We're lucky we're alive and not scattered dead from here to Hell!" he grated. "I'm makin' one more speech and then I'm doin' my talkin' with six-guns—"

"Meanin' jest what?" demanded Herb Landbrenner coldly.

"Meanin' that the rannie who accepts my orders now and later follows his own ideas takes my lead!" snarled Braze brutally. "It's too late to prove that to those five—but I've still got time for the rest!"

"There ain't no call fer them harsh words—"

"I'm declarin' there is! I aim to make my words so strong that they'll stick in your minds! The man that forgets them later—has to be faster than me!"

"I don't like that!" ripped out Landbrenner.

"Make your play, Herb!"

The craggy-faced puncher started fixedly into eyes that glinted back like sunlight on a rifle barrel. For the first time he saw his chief as past events had made him—a dominant, driving, implacable leader with a fixed goal in mind and the determination to reach it! Even Charley Burwash and Tomas de Miramon noted the change with surprise. The hard steel, so far concealed under good-natured grins and careless laughs, stood forth starkly now.

Herb Landbrenner, perhaps as tough as any rannie in the outfit, felt as though a cold breeze were chilling his spine. But he had talked himself into the situation and, much as he disliked the play, he had to go through with it. He was tightening every muscle and nerve for the fastest draw of his life when Charley Burwash, with goose flesh puckering his skin, walked slowly between the prospective duelists.

Charley was gazing with apparent calm straight into the hot eyes of Blaze.

"Yuh done drove home yore point—right strenuous! But—" Burwash swung quickly on Herb—"mebbe it was needed! This kinda play allus comes up in any gang uh fightin' men and that's a good thing—if it don't go too far! But, if they's any more rannahans that's got locoed ideas, I'm pullin' out! I think too much uh my hide tuh risk buckin' Shade unless this outfit is workin' together and—under one man's orders! You Herb! Which way are yuh headin'? Wag yore jaw!"

"Me? I'm stayin—only I ain't favorin' havin' it rammed down my craw thataway—"

"It's gotta be thataway!" cut in Charley, hurriedly to forestall Blaze. "It wouldn't be so bad if the hombre that busted up our plans was the only one tuh die—but he ain't! He takes along his pards, willin' or not! And I'm in favor of cuttin' a maverick like that outta the herd!"

"Aw-w, Hell!" blurted out Herb indignantly. "They ain't one uh us meanin' nothin' like that! Me, I jest wasn't lookin' at it thataway. I reckon I jest run over at the mouth regardless, an' I'm pullin' in my

horns right meek. Blaze! Yuh wasn't on the prod because yuh thought we was copperin' yore play deliberate, was yuh?"

"Not nohow!" declared Blaze instantly, his war-like hackles once more smoothed down by Charley's sensible action. "But whether any hombre did it deliberately or not—we're leaving pards rotting out in the hot sun who might've been alive otherwise! And that isn't the first time it happened! Hell! One lesson should be enough—this one must be the last!"

A rumble of "*Si! Si*" and "It shore is" answered him.

"So we start all over!" dictated Blaze.

There was nothing new in his methods except a greater degree of coordination. Shade, having succeeded once with his old methods, saw no reason for changing them.

Shade's renegades endured repeated attacks by the elusive horsemen of Blaze; they accepted a reasonable amount of dead and wounded comrades as the fortunes of war. For a time they rode in pursuit cheerfully. But, no matter which way they rode, they found no resistance at the end of the chase!

It was the same old thing, over and over, with maddening monotony. Nothing solid was there, nothing that they could gouge, rend, slug and tear apart was within reach! Hardly anything to shoot at! That, to men who were naturally headstrong and violent, was a direct incentive to madness.

Those wild rannies just naturally blew up! And Shade Sloan, craving close, satisfying body contact himself, blew up with them!

"Damn if I can stand this myself!" he exploded. "From now on this outfit don't sleep, rest, eat or quit until we runs down an' corners one of them gangs—any gang—or the hull damn gangs all in one pile!

"Them hellions kin outrun us—but they gotta stop *some place* to rest their broncs, *some time!* We kin follow a trail an' we keeps followin' it till we gets close enough tuh sink jest one slug into jest one of them! That's all I ask. One chance tuh use my guns!"

"They's two gangs out there now, Shade," said Tucson Tom. "Which one does we pick?"

"Hell! Any one! Hit leather!"

As one concentrated mass of venom, Shade's entire outfit hit leather and rushed in headlong, joyous pursuit. That was as Blaze Brill had foreseen. This time, assured of perfect teamwork within his organization, he waited only long enough to be certain that Shade was committed to a relentless chase. Then he gave the prearranged "assemble for action" signal.

That particular patrol which Shade's outfit had picked for its victim happened to be that which Herb Landbrenner led. That leader, exceptionally trail-wise, and eager to prove himself worthy after his hot encounter with Blaze, outdid himself in leading the enemy into ambush.

"Shade's drove Herb's bunch clear off the arranged route. This scheme won't work unless Herb circles to get back. Tomas, do you know any place along the way they're headin' that would do for a trap?"

"No, señor," answered Tomas. "Zose way ees bad. He mus' follow ze plan. Else we lose."

"Will Herb use his brains?" questioned Blaze.

"I'm theenk so," assured Tomas. "We watch."

Anxiously, the two leaders followed the movements of Herb and the men under his command. Herb made no mistake. He led confidently on a long arc, checking the main features of the country as he rode. Back, on a wide circle, he swung with Shade's renegades following like bloodhounds, until he again led on the appointed route. And then, praising his sub-lieutenant, Blaze knew that his careful plans would meet full success.

Fighting men gathered at his gesture. They were dispersed in a like manner to carefully arranged positions. Everything pointed to an ambush when Shade Sloan's outfit reached a narrow canyon which had only one exit—an impossible climb to an impregnable "stand-off."

Chapter 14

FROM a high seat on the eastern slope of the Dos Amigos range Blaze overloked a huge portion of the Santa Inez valley, fitting stage for the coming vital drama. Brilliant blue overhead, below a floor of brownish green, and far to the east the purple backdrop of the Sierra Verdes mountains.

The actors, as yet, were nothing more than tiny, swiftly moving dust clouds coming from the north to enter left. To the right, and below, were the "badlands" which concealed the rocky, narrow canyon where the villain was to die in the last act.

Until this moment the stage manager, Blaze became audience. In spite of himself his heart was palpitating, his breath spasmodic in anticipation of this, the end of a grim man-hunt.

Now Herb and his little band were easily recognized, running with a comfortable lead. So far, so good. On the next ten minutes hung success or failure. Herb needed enough time to swing sharply right around a spur, get out of sight, then swing once more right around a corner into a rocky gully and into hiding.

When Shade rounded the spur he must see, directly ahead of him, the entrance to the fatal canyon—and nothing else! No marks of hoof-prints. Nothing but that canyon mouth, apparently the only way his quarry could go.

Shade, knowing that terrain intimately, knew also that it was a blind canyon. Any men he could drive in ahead of him were doomed, holding on to life only as long as they could dodge his lead. That, according to Blaze Brill's canny calculations, should be sufficient temptation to draw Shade into the trap without calm precaution.

It was.

The outlaw pack swept around the spur five minutes after Herb and his bunch. By that time Herb had pulled his sweated followers to one side, under cover, and now lurked outside the canyon mouth wating to plug up the opening when his pursuers had gone inside.

"We got 'em!" howled Shade, turned savage animal instantly.

"And we've got 'em!" exulted Blaze, and gave the signal that brought warriors clustering like vultures to join Herb's outfit.

Into the echoing canyon they galloped, jostling each other in the race to close with the trapped ones first.

It was only Shade Sloan's fighting animal instinct which prevented a gruesome debacle. Through the wild heat of expected slaughter came the insistent warning of danger to which only the wild things are responsive. Nothing visible was threatening, the sounds made by Blaze's horsemen were swallowed in the roaring drum of his own, yet—the muscles along Shade's spine—crawled!

All this rushed through him with incredible speed. His muscular reaction was instantaneous. Ordinary thought would have spun Shade about to race for the canyon mouth before it could be blocked—but, propelled by blind impulse, he spurted directly to the front.

At first glance, it seemed that his sheer instinct had betrayed him. The canyon ended in sheer walls on all sides!

No! Not on all sides! There to the left, was that impossible climb to an impregnable "stand-off"! Impossible, that is, to the ordinary man. Not so to Shade Sloan. He slacked nothing of his headlong speed but jammed spurs deeply.

"Follow me!" he bellowed, and surged up the slope of a conelike heap of rock, leaving behind those who could, or would, not follow!

Some few of his henchmen, by superb horsemanship, won to the top of the heap and scrambled onto a broad shelf. But most of them were clambering feebly up the treacherous incline, or hopelessly bunched at its foot, when the massed might of Blaze's force struck like a hurricane gone mad.

The first blazing volley brought a welter of men, horses and rocks tumbling in a minor avalanche to the floor of the canyon, there to spill among the milling mass of their partners, sowing unutterable confusion among them.

Into this mass blared the second volley, a merciless mowing that left little breath or life or even hope!

On the ledge, Shade and his few, savage hellions that they were, gasped at the horror below. Gasped—and flung frantic bullets—poured screaming lead into the flickering half circle that was the fighting line of Blaze Brill's rannies, the while what was left of their comrades fought like cornered cougers.

It was sickening massacre. The red fury of that battle numbed staunch hearts, shook hard, experienced gunmen, blanched tanned faces.

"Gawd!" shrilled one of Blaze's men with a note of hysteria in his voice. "Give up! Give up—before all uh yuh is jest bloody meat!"

That humane appeal won a truce.

Brill's clear tenor cut compellingly through clamor.

"Hold fire!"

The reverberating roar checked suddenly, echoed briefly in the cramped canyon and faded to a whisper and a moan. The last persisted—the stricken mutterings of wounded men.

Then came the order:

"Shade Sloan! Drop your guns and slide down!"

Shade's Stetson bulged over the edge of the rock shelf. Tight white lines ringed his mouth and a tremor shook his reply.

"When I come down, Blaze Brill, I'll be rollin'! And spillin' blood over the rocks while I come! Jes—give them rannies uh mine twenty-

four hours tuh ride across the Border. That's all the favors I'll ask—or take—from you!"

"Your men ride unhampered. I want you!"

"Come and get me!"

"I'm going to do that," declared Blaze. "Will you stay peaceful while I tend to your hurt men and bury those that need it?"

"Yeah," agreed Shade.

He stood up unarmed to confirm his word. Whatever his emotions as he watched the merciful attention to his wounded, the burial of his dead and the dismissal of his unhurt and disarmed henchmen, no sign showed on his wooden face. With the men who left under guard went his last hope.

Some of the men, long-time comrades in crime, seemed the most affected by the disastrous defeat. They delayed their going until the last; raised arms to the grim figure above and called:

"So long, Shade."

The reply came full and steady.

"So long, rannies."

Then, with the last echo of fading hoof-beats down the canyon, Shade steeped back from the edge until he was hidden from sight.

"Let's go, Blaze!" he challenged.

"Plenty of time, Shade," was the cool reply.

Blaze had no slightest intention of wasting the lives of his men in a foolhardy attempt to blast Shade from his position. There was no further need for hurry nor intense effort. Just now food, relaxation and rest were most important. With that attended to, Blaze made a careful study of the situation. He called Tomas.

"Have you ever been up along there?"

The Mexican shook his head.

Both men squinted keenly upwards, scanning the ledge which hid Shade and his little band, examining the steep, rocky wall to the rear and as far as they could see on each side.

"Tomas, men could make it over that crest but as near as I can tell they'd have to leave their horses."

But his friend pointed to the terrible slope up which no sane man would drive a horse.

"Eef Señor Shade can do zat," he declared, "maybe he weel fin' ze way across. I'm theenk so, he ees wan smart hombre."

"He sure is," Blaze gave that tribute ungrudgingly. "But how about the other side? Can we block him there?"

"No, señor. Eet ees ver' bad country—bad-lands, no? We 'ave not enough men."

"And we can't tackle him where he is now," declared Anse.

"Suppose he did get away," was Blaze's thoughtful remark, "where would he go?"

"Right back tuh his headquarters," said Charley positively.

"Suppose we were waiting for him—"

"At his headquarters?" interrupted Charley. "He wouldn't ride intuh no trap there, he knows that section too good. An' maybe he's got some secret way tuh get inside."

"That's what I mean!"

"Inside? My Gawd—"

"Look here," insisted Blaze. "He must have taken every man on his pay-roll along, except a guard or two. He can't have more than four or five men up there with him and what's left of his outfit is being hazed across the Border by a few of our men. We're plenty strong enough now to bust Shade's headquarters wide open and give him a hot welcome when he rides in."

"I dunno," Charley scratched his head doubtfully.

"Don't you know the lay-out?"

"I ain't been inside," declared Charley, "but I gotta good idea how it is. Usual, they's a couple guards roostin' high up on each side of the entrance. That's enough tuh stop visitors, because they'd hafta bust down or climb over a heavy gate and fence that is set right solid from wall tuh wall. I don't think they got any barricades or anything like that inside."

"So, once we're past those guards, it's easy."

"Yeah—when we pass 'em. Say, I saw a couple of Shade's old-timers durin' that last ruckus. One of them was Tucson Tom who is high up in Shade's outfit. It's a good bet he had a lotta authority when Shade wasn't around. It's worth a try."

"What's your scheme, Charley?"

"We could come foggin' up in the dark, makin' a heap of excited noise like we was bein' crowded hard. I yells out that I'm Tucson Tom, that Shade's caught plenty Hell an' is due along as soon's he kin throw the other gang off his tail. Them guards ain't got much brains—I'm thinkin' it might work."

Blaze's eyes were glittering.

"It *must* work!" he stated coldly. "I get Shade Sloan tonight!"

His outfit stared. This night would be filled with daring deeds. By dawn either Shade Sloan—or Blaze Brill—would be dead!

"We *all* gets him!" insisted Charley.

"We *all* get him!" he agreed. "But I get my chance at him—first!"

"Mine comes second—if any," growled Charley. "I've been waitin' a long time, too long. Now that you've made up yore mind tuh get intuh Shade's headquarters, I kin hardly wait tuh get started. Man, I'm cravin' fer a look inside Shade's safe. He must have a heap of incriminating papers cached there. Gawd! Mebbe he's got somethin' I kin use tuh clear myself with the Government!"

"Eet ees w'at I'm hope, *amigo,*" came the Mexican's wish.

"I was thinking of that too, Charley," assured Blaze. "When this ruckus is finally settled we'll elect an honest set of law-men in San Luis County. Couldn't be a better man keeping peace."

"Thanks," appreciated Charley sincerely, "but, first, I must be U. S. Deputy Marshal once more!"

"Good luck, old-timer," hoped Blaze. "Now, is there anything else you can think of to help us get inside."

"Yeah, when we come roarin' an' snortin' up tuh that gate we want a couple good men tuh start climbin' up each side immediate. Them guards might be some smarter than I think an' we gotta have our men up there tuh hold 'em peaceful."

"Good idea."

"An' another thing," continued Charley. "I know how this Tucson Tom talks, so, when we get up tuh the gate, lemme do the imitatin'."

"Fair enough," acceded Blaze. "Now, if there's nothing more, we'll get set here."

He selected a small group and issued his instructions.

"You rannies stay here all night. Right after dark, when our main bunch is leaving, you begin throwing lead over that ledge. Keep Shade right interested, bang on your guns and yell at him. Maybe some of his gang will yell back. But keep Shade right interested—and don't let him come down this way!"

"We got enough tuh stop him thataway. But we can't do nothin' tuh keep him from climbin' over the other side."

'That's what I *want* him to do! He must believe that our whole outfit is waiting here—think he can't escape. I want him to reach his headquarters somewhere near midnight—anyhow before dawn."

As soon as darkness came, Blaze led his main outfit silently away toward the last adventure—and the biggest.

An hour or two later Charley warned:

'We're almost within hearin' distance. We better give Shade's guards plenty uh noise tuh listen at. Rake yore broncs, hombres!"

They thundered boldly toward headquarters with Charley's bellow rising above the racket.

"Open that gate! Open up!"

The gate, however, was not open when they pulled up amid a swirling cloud of dust and an excited clamor.

Again Charley bellowed orders.

"Open that gate! Dammit, are you hombres deef?"

"Hell, no! We ain't deef but yuh knows the orders. Who the Hell's that yellin' down there?"

"It's me—Tucson Tom—"

"Where's Shade? What's happened?"

"Plenty! Shade's makin' a stand tuh give us time tuh get organized inside. We gotta double the guards an' be ready tuh give them rannies

hell the minute Shade gets here. He'll be along right soon. Now, open the gate, an' be damned quick about it!"

"All right—all right! Don't get yorself in a lather, Tucson. I gotta climb down first."

"Climb down? What for? Ain't there no one inside?"

"Shore, but they's all sleepin' by this time."

Important information. Only two men were awake and one of those was coming down to make his capture a simple matter. As Charley had guessed, the guards were not very bright.

Capture of Shade's headquarters was absurdly easy. The guard who was sliding down from his high perch to open the gate, purposely "hoorawed" by Charley, grew angry and kept up a running fire of abuse. That never ceased until Charley, with gun bruising his ribs loudly ordered, "Shut up!" Low-voiced, he added:

"Keep waggin' yore jaw, hombre, keep it goin' right natural!"

Recovering from his first fright, the guard heaped a brand of real profanity on the grinning Charley Burwash.

"I'm learnin' some new words," boomed Charley in huge delight. "Hey, you up there! I'm sendin' up a couple extry guards."

"Let 'em come," yelled down the other. "Hope they kin cuss as good as Buck. Man, listen at him! Ain't that perfect?"

"You jest keep listenin' fer Shade. Never mind us!"

That guard, unsupicious, had no chance. He was gagged and bound by two shadows that overwhelmed him with efficient speed.

"We got this one," called a quiet voice from above. "Want us tuh stay here until Shade comes?"

"Yeah, stay up there," ordered Blaze. "I'll relieve you at dawn. The rest of us are going in to pick up the hombres in the bunkhouse, and round up anybody else who's running loose."

Chapter 15

THE bowl-like valley which held Shade's headquarters and "town" was a place of darkness, not one light relieved the strain on aching eyeballs. The faint gleam of stars seemed unable to penetrate the heavy shadows.

Blaze seized one of the bound and gagged guards, freed his feet and jerked him upright.

"Lead the way to those bunkhouses," he ordered.

Being helpless, the man accepted the situation tranquilly and moved away without hesitation. Behind him trailed the dark mass of the invaders. They reached the door of the black bunkhouse and, unexpectedly, the man flung his body against the door with a heavy crash. Angry hands gripped him and flung him away.

From inside came a sleepy protest. Instantly Blaze and Tomas slipped silently through the door, pistols bared. There was a stir of sluggishly moving bodies. A match flared and wavered to a lamp. The wick took hold and light spread feebly through the dark cavern of the bunkhouse.

"Thanks," said Blaze calmly. "Now I can easy see the four of you. Just don't make any foolish moves. Come this way and stand clear of your gun belts."

Tomas was already gathering up weapons and throwing them in a clinking pile on a distant bunk.

"What's the idea wakin' us up thisaway?" demanded one sleepy puncher indignantly.

"Don't let that bother you any," soothed Blaze. "As soon as we tie you up safe you can all go back to sleep. And when you wake up tomorrow, we'll let you take a nice, long horseback ride—across the Border."

"Feilah, yuh can't get away with nothin' like this!" warned one. "I dunno how yuh got past Shade this long but, when he gets his hands on yuh, yuh'll be dyin' right sudden."

"You run off at the mouth too much," chided Blaze. "Plug it up, Tomas. Ease 'em down on their bunks right gentle. Be sure you cover 'em up nice and warm. Pleasant dreams, gents."

Having completed his work, Tomas grinned widely at his prisoners, blew out the lamp flame and his voice called softly:

"Buenos noches, señores."

Outside, Charley was talking earnestly to the guard who had shown sudden rebellion.

"One more break outta you, fellah, will be yore last. You lead us plumb meek tuh headquarters unless yuh want a gun barrel wrapped around yore skull. Are yuh actin' willin' or does we start beatin' down yore ears?"

The man nodded sullenly.

Once more an unwilling guide performed the will of his captors. He halted before a building that could be recognized as large even in the darkness. Blaze groped his way to the double door and cautiously tried the knob. The door was locked.

"Bust it in!" advised Anse.

"Wait a minute!" cautioned Blaze. "We still don't know how many more hombres are running loose. Hold up until we get organized."

One by one he called his men, spreading them in a huge circle and pushing them into the darkness to cover every avenue of approach as best he might by guess-work.

He had barely completed his distribution when a voice cut sharply from above:

"What the Hell is agoin' on down there?"

The hiss of swiftly drawn guns sounded loud. Again came a challenge, in the crack, peevish tone of old age.

"Answer me! Who's that?"

"Damn it! Who d'yuh expect?" Charley Burwash had recovered from his surprise just in time.

The voice spoke again, evidently to someone inside.

"Yeah, the bunch is back," then, louder, "Well, what yuh standin' there for, why don't yuh unlock the door?"

"Lost the key," mumbled Charley. "Hey! Who's that yuh been talkin' to up there?"

"Limpy Joe, uh course. Say, how come yuh don't know? Who are yuh, anyway?"

"Tucson Tom. Yuh ole hellion, who yuh got up there besides? Thought I heard a woman!"

"He! He! He!" cackled the voice. "Say, Tom, that's a right good idee! He thought yuh was a female, Joe. The damn fool lost his key. I'll be right down, Tom, soon's I get my boots on."

"Bring Joe along. I'll buy yuh both a drink."

"Yuh will? Hell, I don't need boots fer that. C'mon, Joe!"

Presently, through the dusty glass, a wavering light could be seen coming down into the lower room. A gnarled old man approached slowly, behind him a badly crippled young man. They were chattering happily in anticipation of the forthcoming drinks.

Blaze had retreated to dimmer light, but a man pressed closely on either side of the door. But their precaution was needless. The old man fumbled open the door and, unsuspicious, stepped back to allow them to enter.

Blaze stepped in quickly, his guns ready, eyes glinting in all directions. Behind him came his outfit, without orders spreading quickly toward heavy shadows which the feeble light of the lantern had been unable to reach.

"Take it easy, Gran'paw," advised Blaze quietly, his guns dangling at his hips. "You, too, Joe. Don't do any loud talking and we'll get along right peaceable. We don't aim to hurt you."

The two men were past any loud noise. Astonishment gagged them. Neither was armed. They were gently nudged into a corner with a Mexican gunman on each side for company.

"Damn!" swore Charley softly. "This is goin' too peaceful an' easy. It ain't right for the cards tuh fall that good. Somethin's due tuh bust wide open pronto."

"Let's make the most of it then," advised Blaze. "Where's Shade's office? The safe ought to be in there."

"Shore, that comes first with me," agreed Charley. "I reckon it's safe tuh light up a couple uh them hanging lamps."

They inspected the place and were surprised to see that it was fitted up as a barroom. Surprised, that is, to see the arrangements, and no bottles of liquor anywhere.

"Gran'paw," assured that he was no longer in danger, found the courage to laugh.

"Hell of a saloon, ain't it?" he cackled. "That's one uh the rules. No liquor handy when Shade's out on a raid. Then he knows his guards ain't gettin' drunk an' neglectin' their duty. Kinda slick, ain't it?"

"Shore is! Where's his office, old-timer?"

Carrying an extra lamp, Charley and Blaze mounted the stairs and found a sumptuous office on the second floor. In one corner was a huge safe. Charley yanked at the handle hopefully but, as might be expected, unsuccessfully.

"Now, how will we bust this thing open?"

Blaze scratched his ear reflectively.

"That's one thing I never thought of. We've got to blow her up with dynamite but a cowpuncher isn't much good at that. Hey! maybe some of those Mexes know—they acted right experienced when they held up Shade's ore convoy."

He leaned over the railing and called down to Tomas.

"Is there any bank robbers in your outfit? We've got to blow up a safe."

Tomas grinned broadly.

"Señor! You would 'ave zem make confession? No, senor. No robbers of ze bank. But, maybe, zere are miner's w'at 'ave bus' ze beeg rocks, no?"

He held a whispered conversation with his outfit and presently two Mexicans slipped into the office. Silently they knelt at the safe, examined it more with swift fingers than eyes.

Behind their backs Blaze winked at Charley. That safe would remain closed no longer than it took to hunt up explosive!

"Hey, Blaze! Charley!" came a tense yell.

Blaze peered over the railing and looked down at a wildly excited cowpuncher, one of the scouts he had sent out.

"What's wrong?"

"I found a bunch uh women! Six or seven young ones! Right good-lookin', too—"

"I knew it!" groaned Charley. "Women! I knew we was due fer plenty trouble!"

"What do you mean, trouble?" grinned Blaze wickedly. "He said they were good-looking."

"All the worse! Damn! That fat's in the fire now. Yuh can't herd no women around like they was men."

He yelled down at the puncher.

"Where are them fillies at?"

"In a bunch uh cabins. We was scoutin' around right careful an' heard 'em talkin'. They seen the lights an' figured on comin' here tuh give their men a right warm welcome—"

"Holy mackerel!" shrieked Charley. "You keep 'em there! Tell 'em it's Shade's orders—"

"Hell! We done told 'em that an' they said—well, I couldn't nohow use them words. But it was right clear that they'd come anyhow unless Shade sent up some drinks."

"Fer Gawd's sake give 'em some! Do anything, but keep 'em there unsuspectin'."

"I'm right willin' tuh bring 'em drinks," declared the puncher eagerly. "But where do I get 'em?"

"Gran'paw," whose mouth had gone dry suddenly with this talk, spoke up with willing information.

"In the cellar! But I ain't got no key fer that—"

"Tuh Hell with a key!" snorted Charley. "Some uh you rannahans give me some heavy weight help."

Volunteers were plentiful and the door was soon wrecked.

"Hold on, hold on!" Charley stemmed the eager rush with grim determination. "They ain't no one takin' a drink—yet! After we finish this job they ain't no limit. Jest hand out two quarts—an' that's only fer them dissatisfied females."

"Are you trusting a thirsty rannie with those bottles?" chuckled Blaze from above. "Being so steady and reliable, you better go yoreself."

Charley hesitated between dismay and duty. Duty won. Carrying the bottles he followed the impatient puncher.

Hugely amused, Blaze leaned idly over the railing and was himself dismayed by a soft feminine voice behind him.

"Welcome home!"

He spun about and saw a figure in the office doorway which was all

generous curves as it was outlined through flimsy clothing by the lamp inside.

"A woman!" gasped Blaze.

"Sure. Never see one before? I thought you were Shade. Where is he?"

"I'm expecting him right soon, ma'am."

The girl stepped aside and the lamp light shone on his face. Surprise warmed her voice.

"I've never seen you before. New man?"

"Righ recent."

"Staying long?" Evidently the girl liked what she saw.

Before he could answer a call came from Tomas.

"Señor Blaze! We 'ave found ze dynamite—"

The girl cut in excitedly.

"Señor Blaze? My Gawd! You're Blaze Brill!"

Like a lithe leopard she sprang backwards, slammed the door and snapped a lock. Almost instantly Blaze's bulk crashed against the heavy door, backed up and charged once more. Tomas and his Mexicans clattered up the stairs and, without wasting breath for questions, added their weight to his.

Wood splintered, the hinges ripped free. But the office had no occupant! Where had the woman gone? There was no other door and only one window—that closed and locked!

Cursing Blaze pounded on the walls, ran hasty fingers along projections. Without doubt there was a secret panel some place but it was too cunningly concealed to be easily found.

Blaze hurriedly explained what had happened to Tomas.

"We must work fast now!" his voice crackled urgently. "Get that safe opened—quick! There's no guessing what might happen with that woman loose! I'll head outside and scout around—I must find her! She might do anything—anything to warn Shade!"

But his search was destined to be hopeless. As he moved quietly and blindly through the darkness, he was repeatedly menaced by the click of cocked triggers and low calls of:

"Who's there? Answer quick!"

"It's me—Blaze! Have you caught a woman?"

One by one, as he completed the circle of his scouts, they denied having either seen nor heard anybody and, since they had heard Blaze's movements, it was proof enough that they had been alert.

Suddenly a muffled thunder shattered the silence. As he raced back toward headquarters, Blaze knew that the Mexican safe-crackers had performed a major operation on Shade's safe. From somewhere, probably from the women's cabins where he had been solemnly dispensing serious advice and welcome whiskey, Charley Burwash came running, eager as a youngster. For his sake Blaze was as eager. It meant so

much to the middle-aged ex-Marshal—nothing less than restored honor if the safe contained what he hoped it would.

Together, the two friends bounded up the stairs to Shade's office. Both halted in the doorway. The walls of the office had an oddly warped appearance. There were long gashes in the woodwork.

"Hell!" growled Blaze at the two Mexicans. "You hombres used too much dynamite!"

But one of them pointed triumphantly toward the safe. The mangled door sagged wearily on cracked hinges.

"They busted it!" howled Charley and made a dive for it, "Blaze! give 'em credit! They done a good job!"

Watching Charley's rapid fingers as he sorted documents, papers and envelopes, Blaze saw that he paid no attention to any cash that rested on the shelves. It was clear that Charley Burwash was no longer a member of the outfit. He was visible again, as he always had been underneath, an officer of the Law.

"Here's somethin' fer Marge," grunted Charley abruptly. "You give her that! She'll appreciate it."

Blaze stuck the papers into his pocket and turned to Tomas, who had stepped beside him.

"You're *vaqueros* have done it again, Tomas," he stated. "Tell 'em we sure appreciate it."

Tomas spoke quickly to his men—who grinned and stood silent.

Then came a roar from Charley:

"I got it! Here's what I wanted! It not only will clear me but it'll nail the 'deadwood' on Shade Sloan!"

"*Bueno!*" approved the Mexican.

"Fine!" cheered the American.

In the midst of heartfelt congratulations a rumbling detonation shook the building with the force of a minor earthquake. The Mexican safe-crackers spat Spanish in excited cadence to Tomas, who interpreted.

"Señores, zose place w'ere thees dynamite was kep' 'ave been blown up! No, zey 'ave not do thees—some udder wan! Now, maybe, we 'ave fire."

There were shrill shrieks outside and suddenly Charley Burwash charged in, badly excited.

"By Gawd!" he swore fervently, "them fillies couldn't even stand two quarts uh liquor among the whole bunch! They're dead drunk an' runnin' hawg wild!"

A dull red was staining the windows, it grew to a bright carmine. Blaze, with muttering men beside him, looked out nervously.

Feminine laughter, urged by alcohol, was rising to hysteria. Lights flickered here and there like speeding fireflies and, where they stopped for a moment, flame mounted later.

"I knew it," moaned Charley, "I knew it would happen!"

Blaze swore acridly.

"They're burning the whole place! That dame I saw is at the bottom of this! I told her I was expecting Shade. She knew I was gunning for him—and this is her way of warning him!"

"Yuh believe that?" demanded Charley abruptly.

"Of course I do!"

"What yuh done about it?"

"All I could," declared Blaze, but Charley's words had aroused doubt. Had he done all he could? Thinking more clearly about the woman, he wondered again how she had disappeared.

He ran up the stairs, pushed open the door again.

Thanks to the wrecking operations of the Mexicans, the office walls were in a weakened condition. Blaze used eyes and fingers shrewdly. Both explored together.

Crack by crack and slit by slit he probed carefully.

Then one slit, or crack, yielded a bit. A yank! He pulled strongly and—exposed the secret passageway!

Gun in hand, he slipped into the dark opening. His brain was busy as he crept cautiously ahead. It was reasonable to suppose that, if Shade had prepared a secret exit from his office, he might also have a way of getting in and out of the bowl-like valley which was known only to himself.

Perhaps this route would lead to it. If so, Blaze intended to wait until the time Shade Sloan appeared.

But the passageway ended in a small shed and, when Blaze found the door, it opened near a group of small cabins. These were living quarters for the women. To look further for some hidden entrance was hopeless in the dark.

Outside, Charley and the gang were earnestly trying to beat out roaring flames with wet blankets. It was too big a job. The whole valley was a seething inferno. The glare lighted up every remote corner with the brilliance of coming dawn. For miles around, any alert rider could not fail to notice it.

If Shade Sloan was free, as Blaze had hoped he would be at this hour, he was amply warned. There was no further hope of surprising him.

"Our scheme is shot to Hell!" grated Blaze angrily. "We're waiting inside the trap and Shade will never stick in his head. This war isn't over while he's alive. Hell! Let's go back to his headquarters and get drunk on his liquor!"

That suggestion was received by the utmost enthusiasm. Exuberant cowpunchers went so far as to round up the more willing women of

the camp. To them, any man fairly presentable could be the means of entertainment.

But, after the first drink, Blaze left others untouched. Disgust at such dismal failure robbed alcohol of its zest. He strode through the wide open doors and stared moodily at the flaming town. Here was fitting color to match the red revelry that was rising rapidly to feverish intensity within. Yet the heat of the carousal left Blaze cold.

Suddenly the hard beat of noise hushed.

Curious, Blaze turned to discover the cause. Distinctly, he heard words that carried definite authority.

"I said, *'Where is Blaze Brill?'*"

Blaze tensed. He recognized that voice, though he doubted the evidence of his ears. No two men spoke that way.

He stepped through the doors, followed the direction of every eye in the place and saw—Shade Sloan!

Shade! Leaning carelessly over the railing on the second floor and speaking as though those below were his own men, not the gunfighters who had, for weeks past, done their utmost to kill him.

Shade Sloan surely knew that! He knew, also, that the lead in the guns among that hostile crowd could load his body—fill it!—long before he could overcome them! Yet he calmly repeated his original question.

"I'm here, Shade!" called Blaze from below. "How did you get in?"

"By a special way. I'm leavin' that same way—after I kill yuh! Damn yuh, Blaze Brill! Yuh've wrecked my spread, blasted all my men tuh Hell—but you ain't livin' tuh crow about it! Clear that floor an' warn yore men. This is jest between us two—unless yuh feel like runnin'. I'll come down the stairs and move three paces out. Anytime after that—*fill yore hand!*"

"Come ahead!"

Through silence as heavy as dense fog, Shade lowered his body step by step, down the stairs over which he had once been master—and hoped to be again. He came quickly, but time dragged into ages. One—two—his seemingly slow feet trod the level floor. The third step and—

"Now!" boomed Shade, linking his words with chained lightning action.

Only the halting fraction of a second beat him!

In that flicking instant, powder in the chamber of a Remington .44 cartridge had propelled a conical pellet of metal through his heart. Simple mechanics! Yet that process abruptly ended a life which, for many years, had dealt ruthlessly with countless other lives.

Blaze Brill stared down at the limp figure dully. Mechanically he chugged home his long-snouted gun. His fight had been won. Sudden-

ly, he was unutterably weary—eager for a well-earned rest—and peace.

"Tomas!" he called softly, "if there are no objections, I'm heading back to the Rancho de Miramon. I just remembered I left something right valuable there."

"Ah! The Señorita Margaret! Senor! My house ees yours! *Vaya con Dios, amigo.*"

THE END

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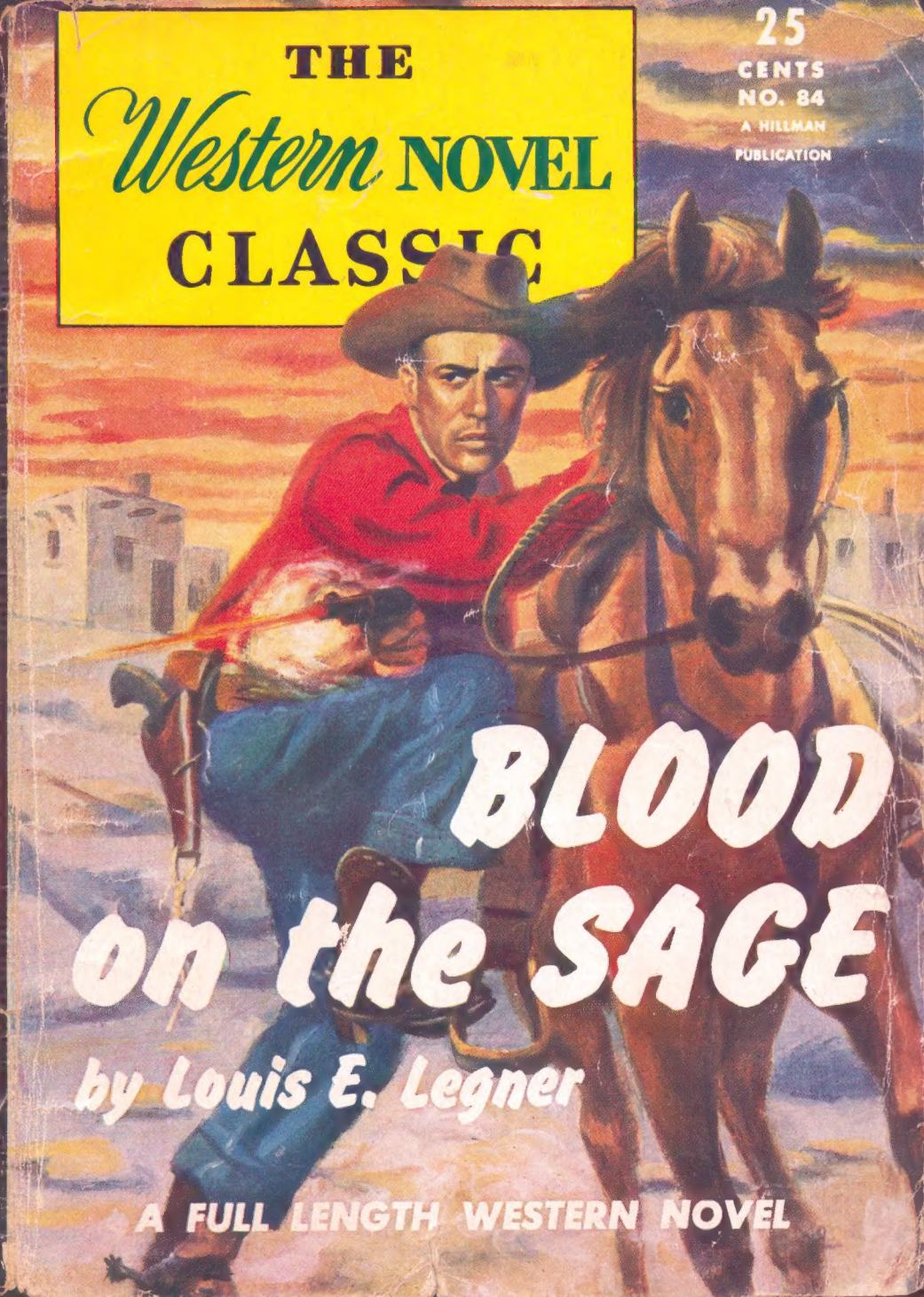

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